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Kristyn Rohrer

Islam & Interfaith Dialogue:

Innovative Diplomacy Between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran

Kutztown University

Department of Anthropology & Sociology

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Fall 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This meta-communicative study provides an analysis of global interfaith dialogue as it pertains to peace and conflict, with a primary focus on Islam. The Islamic Republic of Iran and United States have a complicated history. Their diplomatic relationship is rife with manipulation, radicalism, and a disregard for human dignity. Currently, the US is imposing hundreds of sanctions and restrictions on Iran, from nuclear energy to medicine, as a result of President Trump's decision to back out of the Iran Deal. However, other forms of dialogue are affecting positive relations between the two countries. Interfaith dialogue between North American Mennonites and Iranian Shia Muslims are mending the gaps in international diplomacy. As a result, this research provides a collection of scholarly opinions on interfaith dialogue as a tool for peacemaking in the context of Iran as an Islamic Republic. In doing so, this analysis includes an intimate focus on the perspectives of Shia Muslims in Iran regarding Western prejudice against Islam, Islamic conceptions of peace and pluralism, the intersection of religion and government, and their country's relationship to the United States. The goal of this research is to argue the importance of religious literacy regarding relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and to support an avenue for further development in peacemaking between Iran and the US.

## INTRODUCTION

As a sacred system of beliefs and practices, religion has the power to influence individuals' and societies' ways of thinking and acting. Political leaders have manipulated this power to promote and exacerbate conflict, particularly when different religious systems confront one another. The relationship between violence and religion, for Islam in particular, became a fundamental concern for scholars and politicians following the reprehensible attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). Following these heinous attacks, Islam has become the face of antagonism in the American socio-political climate, replacing the post-Cold War scapegoat of communism. That being said, the attacks on 9/11 were by no means representative of Islam as a whole, in the same way that the Ku Klux Klan is not representative of Christianity. Nonetheless, American ideological representations of Islam have heavily misconstrued Western culture's understanding of Islam, specifically as it pertains to peace and conflict.

Islam is deeply involved in the social conceptions of both peace and conflict: Islamic texts address notions of peace, dictate when war is justified, and how conflicts are resolved in Islamic societies (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). Muslim perspectives on peace, conflict, religious pluralism, and interfaith dialogue are all derivatives of peace as a holistic concept. An Islamic conception of peace is established through an understanding of the Qur'an, the Hadith (written accounts of the Prophet Mohammed's sayings), and the Sunnah (the Prophet Mohammed's deeds/doings) (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). Through the compilation of these religious bodies, one can gain a preliminary understanding of what peace means within the scope of Islam.

Today's socio-political context in Western society (e.g. post 9/11 America, the election of President Donald Trump) has deterred individuals from understanding Muslim perspectives.

However, interfaith dialogue has become a powerful tool for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States and abroad. Religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue are vitally important to Muslims, especially for those living in countries where Islam is a religious minority (Hussain, 2003). Politically speaking, the United States has had various unstable interactions with the minority Muslim populations within the country, in addition to orchestrating a multitude of manipulative actions with Muslim majority countries in the Middle East (including, but by no means limited to, the Islamic Republic of Iran).

Since President Trump's decision to pull out of the Iran Nuclear Deal, the United States has re-imposed all sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, in addition to the inclusion of nearly 700 new entities, including banks, individuals, and vessels (Borak & Gaouette 2018). Current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declares that the US goal in implementing these increased sanctions is to "starve [the Iranian] regime" and "restore democracy" in Iran (Borak & Gaouette 2018). Critics however contend that in doing so the United States is dividing itself from European allies, gambling in the oil markets, deepening the humanitarian suffering of the Iranian people, and severely deterring Iranian moderates who are open to working with the US (Borak & Gaouette 2018). Although the US is attempting to put pressure on the Iranian government, it is the Iranian people who are truly suffering at the hands of American dominance and greed. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Dr. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, asserts that Trump and his supporters are projecting a "narrow minded definition of American nationalism which negates the interests of the rest of the world" and perpetuates US hegemony (O'Toole, 2018). The American nationalism and hegemony that Sajjadpour references is built on anti-immigrant and anti-Islam, exclusivist attitudes that are isolating Americans from one another and the rest of the world.

In an attempt to foster world peace and the dignity of human life for all Americans and Iranians, this research argues the following: A constructive way to facilitate and reestablish a positive relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran is for American scholars and government officials to engage in interfaith dialogue. An interfaith aspect to peace building is essential to an understanding of the Islamic Republic and must be examined through both Islamic and non-Islamic lenses. Although the complicated history of distrust and manipulation underlie actions carried out by both countries, ownership must be taken for the detriment that past administrations have inflicted on the Iranian and American people. A meta-communicative analysis of interfaith dialogue, made possible by Mennonite Central Committee and the International Institute for Islamic Studies, also provides insight into the possibility of re-establishing and maintaining peace between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In order to argue this point effectively, this research includes an analysis of the following: the socio-political portrayal of Iran and Islam as “other” in Western media; Islamic perspectives on peace, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue; the implementation of interfaith dialogue as a peacemaking tool and its intersection with politics; and lastly, a meta-communicative account of a 2018 interfaith learning tour in Iran. A theoretical framework is also provided to educate the reader on the importance of addressing diplomacy between the United States and Iran with religious literacy and cultural understanding, the role that the US government and media has played in demonizing Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the concepts of “othering” and Orientalism. Including all of these aspects begets an accurate, critical analysis of the intersections between religion and international diplomacy.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is analytically framed in the cultural studies approach to religious literacy. The cultural studies approach itself is based upon three assertions outlined by Religious Studies scholars: religions are internally diverse; religions evolve and change over time, and religious influences are embedded in all elements of culture (Moore 2015). When analyzing peace and interfaith dialogue from a Muslim perspective, one must recognize that there is no single Muslim perspective. The ideal type of the Muslim or Christian perspective recognizes that there is internal diversity and often conflict within any and all religious belief systems. Therefore, the ideal type of the Muslim perspective is based upon specific accounts of Muslim scholars and, for this particular research, places an emphasis on Twelver-Shiism in Iran. In addition to being internally diverse, religions also evolve and change over time. The rituals, symbols, and ideologies of Muslims and Christians today are not the same as they were 50 years ago or at the time of their inception. The history of peace and conflict between and within various religious systems change how religions are practiced and how they relate to one another. Lastly, religion influences all elements of culture. For example, the intersectionality of religion, politics, and culture are extremely relevant to Iran as an Islamic Republic. An understanding of the above three assertions of religious literacy then lay the foundation for the cultural studies approach.

According to Moore (2015) there are four components to the cultural studies approach that allow for a critical, cross-cultural analysis based on religious literacy. First, the cultural studies approach is inherently interdisciplinary. Religious scholars recognize that cultural, political, economic, and religious lenses all coincide and act intrinsically upon one another (Moore 2015). Therefore, it is pertinent to offer not only a religious studies analysis, but also an analysis of culture, politics, history, economics, etc. One cannot understand Iranian politics or culture



without also understanding Shia Islam. Second, the cultural studies approach is conducted on the basis of religious “situatedness.” Situatedness refers to the assumption that all knowledge claims are situated within a particular socio-historical context (Moore, 2015). Knowledge claims made by current religious and/or political figures are framed within and stated as a result of the current socio-historical context. This notion of situatedness is applied to both religious claims and researched texts and source materials. As a result, what is considered relevant to global society, whether researched by scholars in the field, officially stated by a political leader, or simply discussed by the general public, is in fact situated.

Third, within the cultural studies model there is a recognition and analysis of power dynamics. The issue of power vs. powerlessness involves not only the key players, but also key perspectives and ideologies (Moore, 2015). Consequently, when analyzing the context of interfaith dialogue in Iran as a Western researcher, there must be an examination of the unequal power relationship between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, an emphasis on not only Western but also Islamic perspectives of dialogue, peace, and conflict resolution is necessary. The fourth and final component of the cultural studies model asserts that cultural norms are fluid and socially constructed. Religion exists as an unfixed type built on belief systems, which are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by their believers. Just as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic class are all elements of cultural interpretation, so too is religion (Moore, 2015). Culture and religion have a dialectical relationship. Therefore an understanding of religion as a situated, fluid, and culturally embedded phenomenon is imperative to understanding its role in society.

In addition to conducting this research through the lens of the cultural studies approach to religious literacy, there is also an underlying framework of social “othering” and the social

construction of the stranger. The way in which both societies and individuals address that which is unfamiliar or strange is relevant to today's global society. With the consistent increase of globalization, the intersection of different religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial groups is inevitable. But how does one respond to these new global social dynamics and how does that response influence their social relationship? Academics, such as social theorist Georg Simmel, have studied these questions for centuries.

In Simmel's essay *The Stranger* (1908), he addresses the concept of social distance and how it affects our perception of the stranger. Simmel writes:

“There is a kind of "strangeness" that rejects the very commonness based on something more general which embraces the parties. The relation of the Greeks to the Barbarians is perhaps typical here, as are all cases in which it is precisely general attributes, felt to be specifically and purely human, that are disallowed to the other. But "stranger," here, has no positive meaning; the relation to him is a non-relation; he is not what is relevant here, a member of the group itself. As a group member, rather, he is near and far at the same time, as is characteristic of relations founded only on generally human commonness. But between nearness and distance, there arises a specific tension when the consciousness that only the quite general is common, stresses that which is not common. In the case of the person who is a stranger to the country, the city, the race, etc., however, this non-common element is once more nothing individual, but merely the strangeness of origin, which is or could be common to many strangers. For this reason, strangers are not really conceived as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type...”

Simmel (1908) argues that physical distance also creates social distance, or a perceived barrier that deters us and brings us further away from mutual social interaction. When relating to that which is far or unfamiliar, such as a “stranger to the country,” the stranger is not conceived of as an individual, but rather a foreigner: a stranger “of a particular type” (Simmel, 1908). Simmel (1908) states that “stranger” in this context “has no positive meaning.” When encountering a stranger of this type a sense of tension develops, due to the fact that the social relationship is purely founded on “general human commonness.” Interactions, such as this, highlight to the

observer that which is un-common or different, creating social distance between the actors. When being human is the only perceived commonality, people often become consumed by (visible) differences in race, ethnicity, religion, etc. Therefore social distance, as it relates to the foreigner, strips the stranger of their individuality and socially marks them as ‘other.’

Simmel (1908) references the relationship between the Greeks and Barbarians as example of the stranger as a foreigner; however, the same can be said for Americans and Iranians and/or Christians and Muslims. The religious landscape of the United States is increasingly changing. Although originally established by and primarily populated with Protestant Christians, the US is currently home to 3.45 million Muslims, a figure that has been steadily increasing over the past decade (Mohamed, 2018). The introduction of an unfamiliar religion has caused many Christians to respond to the increase in Muslim individuals as strange, other, and (to some) threatening. The same cannot necessarily be said for Americans and Iranians as social groups. Current limitations on travel, such as visa denials and the infamous Muslim Ban, are currently keeping most Americans and Iranians both physically and socially distant. The beliefs about the other are therefore dominated by outside interest groups who control society’s acquisition of knowledge. These interest groups, often media/news outlets and official government stances, assert their knowledge claims about the other without ever being checked or challenged. As a result, social groups like Iranians and Muslims fall into Simmel’s category of the stranger, or a foreign other.

One of the West’s most recurring images of the stranger/other is the Orient. Edward Said (1978) coined the term Orientalism to refer to the particular lens through which the West views and interacts with the Eastern World, or the Orient. Said (1978) considers the Near Orient as “the lands of the Arab Near East, where Islam was supposed to define teal and racial characteristics.” The Near Orient essentially includes parts of Northern Africa as well as the span of Turkey,

across the Arabian Peninsula and the Old Persian Empire (commonly referred to in the Western World as the Middle East), to India. Orientalism is Western domination and influence over the Orient (Said, 1978), typically stemming from underlying ethnocentric attitudes. The power dynamic between the Islamic Republic of Iran and United States also reflects this complex hegemony. Said (1978) argues that, “from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II, France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; [however, since then] America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did (Said, 1978). This tradition of Western ethnocentric dominance has played into the collective consciousness of Americans. Not only does Orientalism create a fantasy of the generalized inferior “other,” but also plays a role in constructing the Western self as “superior.” Harkening back to Simmel’s work, the dichotomy of civilization (the Greeks) vs. barbarism (the Barbarians) also comes into play. For example, the West has appointed itself as the civilized, savior of democracy for the world (despite its clear political and social flaws). As a result the West has justified colonizing and taking advantage of the Orient through a distorted self-actualizing lens of false superiority. Orientalism has played an influential role in the US relationship to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The US has taken advantage of Iran and the Iranian people politically, socially, and economically. Iran and Islam are considered part of the Orient and therefore an ‘other’ in eyes of the United States.

The concepts of Orientalism and ‘othering’ involve the binary labeling of us versus them. Our primitive neural systems deal in binaries as a means of survival: for example, denoting the concepts of good vs. bad and pain vs. pleasure (Dozier, 2002). From an evolutionary perspective, developing us-them divisions is a natural biological process that emerges from basic survival and therefore is not inherently problematic. However, all us-them separations have the potential to

develop into hate or anger during times of stress and conflict (Dozier, 2002). This is because us-them differentiation, although a helpful tool for primitive survival, can develop in-group/out-group stereotyping when examined in modern, global society. Those that are not considered “us” or the in-group, are inevitably considered “other.” Those of the in-group do not concern themselves with the consternations (or at most times even the existence) of the other; they are often viewed with indifference and at times vague hostility (Dozier, 2002). Even indifference is rife with a lack of empathy that, when tested by conflict, can lead to destructive stereotyping tendencies.

## METHODOLOGY

After receiving IRB approval from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018, I traveled to the Islamic Republic of Iran to act as a participant observer for an interfaith tour organized by the Hikmat International Institute for Oriental Wisdom and Spirituality. In addition to acting as a participant observer in group interviews and interfaith exchanges, I also interviewed additional subjects for the purpose of this study. In total the sample consisted of 15 individuals (13 male and 2 female). Although the sample size is small, nearly all of the individuals formally interviewed were heavily involved in interfaith dialogue practices as both scholars and participants for years. Unfortunately the sample only consists of two females, primarily due to the fact that Muslim women are not permitted to high ranking religious positions, such as sheiks or ayatollahs. Additionally, most established Iranian religious scholars are men (although according to the president of the University of Religions and Denominations, currently more than fifty percent of overall Iranian university admissions are women), and the individuals who organized the interviews for this Iranian learning tour were also all men. The women interviewed (one a Muslim Iranian and the other a Christian American) were both married to men who are either currently or were previously employed at interfaith dialogue centers. That being said, the comments of a number of everyday Iranian women, who were not officially interviewed, are also included in this research study.

Group interviews were pre-established by the Hikmat Institute and applied to half of the interview subjects. These meetings were conducted in universities and other institutes, and lasted for several hours. Many of the group interviews took place over coffee and snacks or lunch. The majority (9/14) of interview participants were Iranian Shia Muslims, including very high-ranking religious scholars (e.g. asheik and an ayatollah). Iranian subjects primarily consisted of

professors, university presidents, and religious scholars/clergy. Representatives of a few minority religious groups in Iran were also interviewed. All interviews taking place in the Islamic Republic of Iran were carried out April 7-22, 2018. Due to travel constraints, some interviews involved follow-up email interviews after meeting and developing prior contact with the participant. This was the case for five Iranian professors/religious scholars. In some cases, email communication continued from April-September 2018. The remaining two (out of the fourteen) interview subjects were American Christians who have participated extensively in interfaith dialogue in Muslim majority regions. Interviews with American subjects were conducted in the US between August-September 2018. These interviews were audio recorded and took place over lunch or coffee, lasting approximately one hour each. During participant observation and one-on-one interviews conducted in Iran, data was recorded via handwritten notes. Interaction with local Iranian participants was subject to chance opportunities, as they arose. Such interactions with local Iranian participants took place in public spaces, such as coffee shops, hotel lobbies and cultural/religious tourist sites.

Individuals were not required to sign an informed consent form, due to the fact that many participants in the Islamic Republic of Iran may feel suspicious of signing their names to an official paper. Iranians may be reluctant to put their names to a document offered by an American, even in the friendliest of situations. For this reason, informed consent was obtained orally by means of communication with the researcher. As the researcher, I stated my position as an undergraduate student, my research goals, and the purpose of the interview. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to collect and publish data on interfaith activity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The respondents then had the ability to decide whether they wished to participate in the study, and could opt out of the interview at any point.

## **Mennonite Engagement & Obtaining Access**

Although the United States has had complicated and often negative relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, this political relationship does not preclude other forms of connection between the two countries. The Mennonite community in North America, (in this particular case) headed by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), has established a religious and aid-based connection with the country of Iran and its citizens. Following the 1990 Manjil-Rudbar earthquake in northern Iran, MCC set out to establish connections with Iran through the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) (Martin, 2014). Since then, MCC and IRCS have participated in regular interfaith dialogue conferences, student exchanges, and cultural tours. Through this extremely unique relationship, Mennonites (primary based in Pennsylvania, USA and Ontario, Canada) have been able to foster global interfaith dialogue with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and gain insight into both inter- and intra-state aspects of interfaith dialogue.

Mennonite socio-religious history emerged out of a context of peace, power, and community. As evident in the Anabaptist tradition, Mennonite spirituality focuses heavily on peaceful nonresistance as discussed in the Gospel. As faithful followers of Jesus, Mennonites recognize peacemaking efforts and the eradication of injustice as fundamentally important and extremely spiritual acts (Theissen, 2013). Additionally, the historical context of Mennonite persecution has shaped the Mennonite worldview as it relates to the notions of power and community. The extreme persecution that Mennonites faced in Europe has fortified a clear dualism between church and state for many North American Mennonites (Theissen, 2013). In addition to persecution as an example of power relations, these contextual elements also influenced Mennonite spirituality to promote a distinct sense of community.



Initially, the central focus of Mennonite peacemaking was the refusal to participate in war, specifically the US military draft in World War II (Thiessen, 2013). Leading into the mid-late 20th century, organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee continued to expand their peace building efforts and global aid development. Mennonite conflict scholars have developed peacebuilding practices that extend beyond picking up the pieces in the aftermath of conflict, to addressing the root causes of conflict in tandem with supplying provisional aid and development assistance (Theissen, 2013). This ideology toward peacebuilding practices is implemented by MCC and many other Mennonite affiliated organizations.

The following research study could not have been conducted without the pre-established relationship between North American Mennonites and Iranian Shia Muslims. As the researcher, I was able to participate in the Iranian religious and cultural tour through my association with James Street Mennonite Church and Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness. Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness is a grassroots association dedicated to promoting justice, environmental protection, and peaceful solutions to conflict. As a member of James Street Mennonite Church (located in Lancaster City, PA), I had access to participation in the Middle East Interest Group of the Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness association. Ed Martin, a member of the Middle East Interest Group, former Eastern Mennonite University professor and director for the Center for Interfaith Engagement, and former MCC director for Central & South East Asia organized the tour from the North American side. Martin has lead three similar tours and visited the Islamic Republic of Iran roughly 15 times. That being said, Martin attributes the success of the Iranian learning tours to the status of the International Institute for Islamic Studies (IIIS) in Iran and its director, Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali.

## RESULTS

### Historical Context

Conflicts do not occur in a vacuum. There are always underlying factors in relation to the context of the conflict that fuel feelings of blame, distrust, animosity, fear, hatred, and/or ethnocentrism. Knowing the context enables peacemakers to not only predict the behaviors and direction of the conflict, but also prevents them from applying unsuitable solutions that could potentially exacerbate the conflict (Abdullah et al., 2016). In order to better understand how to move forward in terms of diplomacy and peace between the US and Iran, there must first be a critical analysis of the contextual factors most relevant to today's socio-political context. Peacemaking models recognize history, culture, religion, and media (among others) as contextual factors that influence and shape the nature of conflict (Abdullah et al., 2016). The contextual history of the relationship between Iran and the United States is arguably the strongest element deterring both nations from moving forward together, peacefully [See Figure 1.1 in the Appendix for a timeline of important conflict events in the history between the US and Iran].

When Americans examine their historic animosity toward Iran they typically fixate on the embassy hostage crisis of 1979. On the other hand, Iranians trace their negative attitudes further back to 1953, and the CIA and British Intelligence orchestrated overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Muhammad Mossedegh. Mossedegh had socialist leanings and plans to nationalize Iranian oil. Western Cold War politics and interests in the exploitation of Middle Eastern oil sources lead the US to join Great Britain's plans for a military coup. In July 1953 Western forces put those plans into effect and by August the Pahlavi Shah, Mohammad Reza, whom the US regarded as their prime Iranian ally, was reinstated as the nation's leader (Axworthy, 2016). The overthrow of Mossedegh is rarely discussed in an American context,

because many Americans have no knowledge of the event and government sentiment still supports American intervention in Middle Eastern affairs. Ed Martin recalls discussing the Mossadegh incident following an ecumenical delegation in 2007. During the delegation Martin met with senators in Washington, which included James Jeffrey, who at the time was the “number two person” in the Middle East Bureau. According to Jeffery, the overthrow of Mossadegh was the “best thing” the US did for Iran.

Although US responsibility for the coup is not quite so straight forward, the CIA played an indisputable role in suppressing democracy in Iran *after* the coup (Axworthy, 2016). Most notably, the CIA was instrumental in forming the Shah’s secret police, SAVAK, which oppressed Iranian freedom for the following quarter century (Axworthy, 2016). The Shah was extremely disliked by the Iranian public for his cruelty and consolidation of wealth and power. As the Shah’s power began to deteriorate and the senior Islamic clergy rose in opposition, including the Ayatollah Khomeini, the US continued to support the Shah. The culminating event of these conflicting forces was the Shah’s decision to flee to the United States for medical treatment in January 1979, and President Jimmy Carter allowing him to seek refuge there. It was then that the Ayatollah Khomeini was welcomed back to Iran and the Islamic Revolution came to fruition. During this time many Iranians, whether members of the government or general public, believed that American leaders were conspiring ways to consolidate power and reinstate the Shah in Iran; a fear that, considering Iran’s history with the United States and the fact that Western re-imposition of the Shah had previously occurred, is quite rational. However, the Islamic Republic’s response to this Western threat resulted in the single most detrimental event in Iran’s relationship to the United States, at least from an American perspective.

The hostage crisis of 1979 was a direct result of the United States receiving the Shah for asylum and medical treatment. At this point, Khomeini had appointed a Provisional Government. On November 4<sup>th</sup> a group of university student radicals occupied the US embassy building in Tehran and detained the diplomatic staff, demanding that the “criminal, deposed Shah” be returned to Iran (Axworthy, 2016). Images of hostages, handcuffed and blindfolded, flooded American media. Within Iran, the embassy takeover ignited an atmosphere of radicalism and calamity that renewed a sense of revolutionary fervor; Khomeini issued a statement on November 5<sup>th</sup> praising the students’ act as a “second revolution” and insinuating that the embassy take over had a layer of espionage, which was helped by the release of documents obtained in the US embassy linking his more liberal opponents to contacts with the US (Axworthy, 2016). It was not until January 1981, as the new US president Ronald Reagan finished his inaugural address, that Khomeini’s government officially released the embassy hostages. By releasing the hostages at this moment, Khomeini reiterated the purely political stance he took in this crisis. For Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran, putting politics above the ethical treatment of human beings had immeasurable consequences. The hostage situation has colored the view of Iran so badly that it has become the overarching radical image of Iran and Shiism for nearly every American politician, not to mention the general American public.

Although the overthrow of Mossadegh and the US hostage crisis were not in any way the only contextual factors in the conflict relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, they are extremely salient and reflective of the way that Iranians and Americans related to one another’s shared past. The political differences between the United States and Iran have (at least in the case of North America) been cast as differences in culture and religion.

Specifically, the political-economic sources of tensions are shrouded by claims of fundamental difference (i.e. Iranians are violent Muslims living in a backward culture). The US paints itself as a righteous, civilized society by casting Iranians as barbarian ‘others, harkening back to Simmel’s (1908) work. As a result, the US involvement in Iran and its negative impact (e.g. the overthrow of Mossadegh, the support of the Pahlavi Shahs, economic sanctions, etc.) are conveniently left out of the conversation. The obligation is put on both governments to acknowledge and take ownership for past mistakes, and to honestly seek forgiveness and peace rather than vindictively holding on to the damage that has already been done. When attitudes that are dictated by Cold-War politics and ethnocentric biases still prevail in American politics it is nearly impossible to move forward. Additionally, allowing Iranian politics to dictate the ethical treatment of civilians is unacceptable for peaceful reconciliation. These damages made by past administrations are reflected in the socio-historical context of the conflict, which includes the influences of religion, politics, and the media.

### **Iran & Islam as ‘Other’**

#### *Western Media Framing*

Regardless of increasing globalization and developments in technology, the vast majority of people around the world do not travel internationally (Saleem, 2007). For this reason, media and news outlets play an essential role in shaping the public’s impression of other countries and ethnic groups. The United States has a history of portraying foreign countries and people through a skewed lens: exaggerating or marginalizing certain issues, providing selective information, and exaggerating enemy nation’s power to garner support from policy makers and the general public;

US coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and 2003 invasion of Iraq are just a few examples of this trend (Saleem, 2007).

The Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception to US foreign country image-framing. Framing is used to communicate certain aspects of a perceived reality more saliently than others, in order to evoke and advance a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993; Saleem, 2007). Despite the reality that Western people do not possess much reliable information on the Islamic Republic or the Iranian people, striking images of angry men in turbans and crowds with burning flags often come to Americans' minds. Western media reporting repeatedly stresses elements of Iranian culture as abnormal, irrational, and dangerously problematic (Axworthy, 2013). By framing Iran in such an unnatural light and reporting heavily on items of protest and anomie, the US has managed to establish a particular image-frame through which the American public conceptualizes Iran.

In their book on US press coverage of Iran between 1951-1978, Dorman & Fahrang (1987) found that American media sources built images of Iran based on different eras of US foreign policy interests, in the hope of shaping public sentiment in the government's favor. During the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran was a strategic ally to the US, despite the Shah's implicit consolidation of wealth and the countless human rights violations he carried out against the Iranian people. By 1978 Iran became America's largest non-NATO recipient of economic aid and weapons. Additionally, Iran was home to more than forty thousand working US military and civilian personnel (Dorman & Fahrang, 1987). However, this relationship changed drastically once the Shah could no longer serve as a puppet for US interest in the Middle East and the Islamic Revolution came to fruition. Policy makers and the press asserted that Khamenei's government represented fanatic Islamic fundamentalism and exported terrorism (Saleem, 2007).

This sentiment continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the United States became increasingly and irresponsibly involved in Middle Eastern affairs. During his State of the Union Address in 2002, President George W. Bush declared Iran a member of the “Axis of Evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea. Bush and his administration used the metonymic phrase “Axis of Evil” to evoke images of Nazism, fascism, and satanic forces (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). The image shaping of the Iranian nation as the antithesis to world peace interests therefore runs along the lines of skewed US political self-interest.

Not only has the US framed the image of Iran as a foreign nation, but also the host of a foreign religion. Anti-Muslim sentiment and scapegoating has been the overwhelming theme in Western media since the end of the Cold War (Saleem, 2007). For the United States in particular, it was the Iranian Revolution that galvanized anti-Muslim sentiment. Mughees-uddin (1995) asserts that the “Islamic Character” projected by Western media portrays Islam as a threat to American peace and security, and Iran the pinnacle of terrorist Islamic fundamentalism. Furthermore, Mughees-uddin (1995) argues that the US media has purposefully attempted to evoke conflict and misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims by framing Christianity as a religion of tolerance and free market economics, and Islam as an impediment to social freedom. The ideology of Islam and Iran as a direct adversary to American values is also evident in US media coverage of the hostage crisis in 1979. Although the incident was extremely damaging for the US, it was Shia Islam rather than the actions or inactions carried out by the Iranian government that was targeted as the true enemy. During coverage of the hostage crisis, ABC commenter Frank Reynolds made comments to affirm that Iranian Muslims are fueled by hatred. Over a crowd of Iranians chanting, “God is great,” Reynolds contended that the real meaning was “Hatred of America” (Saleem, 2007). When political rhetoric turns to attacking and

generalizing an entire religion, it entirely reframes the conversation and widens the gap of mistrust and misrepresentation.

### *Iranian Perspectives*

The US media projection of Iran as a country full of radical Islamic militants is very clearly visible to the Iranian people as well. Ordinary Iranians even joke with the few American tourists they come across asking if they have “met any terrorists yet.” The son-in-law and representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani argues that American media sources associate Iran and Islam with terrorist groups such as ISIS. Notwithstanding, one of the biggest frustrations or fears Iranian’s have with the US representation of their country is framing Iran and its citizens as backwards (Erdbrink & Fanning, 2018). The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister asserts that America’s hegemonic media distorts the image of Iran and projects the country as socially, politically, and religiously “abnormal” (Erdbrink & Fanning, 2018). He continues that the relationship of distrust and suspicion between Iran and the West has only been exacerbated by this misrepresentation.

Over the past year there have been a number of demonstrations in Iran and the reality of their manifestation has not been clearly reported by mainstream Western sources. Iranians understand that these demonstrations represent a lot of the tension that is brewing within their society and the severe pressure that the Iranian government is currently under. Nevertheless, many of the Iranians who were interviewed indicated that these protests have been highly exaggerated by the US media, and have a heavier focus on the economy than social issues. Iranian religious scholars who were interviewed are quoted saying: “Due to the very unfair US sanctions against [our country], there has been more economic pressure on the lower classes in



Iran and this led to some demonstrations;” “The protests began as primarily economic and they were supported by many conservatives loyal to the system.” What began as economic also turned to a protest of ongoing social issues, namely that of women and the compulsory hijab.

Furthermore, when it comes to the issue of freedom of speech in a religious state such as Iran, the lines of social, political, and economic protest tend to blur together.

That being said, Iranians recognize the need for governmental transparency. This includes both the transparency of the Iranian government to listen and respond to demonstrations in an ethical manor and for the US to cover and report on such global demonstrations ethically as well. Sheikh Morteza Rezazadeh proclaims, “I personally hope that the whole world including my own country will be more tolerant and provide higher freedom of speech and other types of freedom for people. In my opinion the current situation is not ideal in any country including the United States and Iran. But according to the law, people are free to talk and criticize the authorities and men of power as long as it is not a hate speech or is not insulting. Being committed to this law by the governmental officials and all other people is something that I believe needs a lot of improvements.” Regardless of the fact that the governments of both the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran should improve their transparency, that does not justify the violation of human rights.

Because the Islamic Republic has been the target of ethnic and religious discrimination by the United States, Iranian religious leaders have called upon Muslim youth in Western nations to separate political bias from an understanding of religious truth. In his message to the youth of North America and Europe following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Ayatollah Khamenei (2015) addressed how the West has manipulated the image of Islam and questions Western incentives to cast Islam as a threat:

“Many attempts have been made over the past two decades, almost since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, to place [Islam] in the seat of a horrifying enemy... Why is it that attempts are made to prevent public awareness regarding an important issue such as the treatment of Islamic culture and thought? You know well that humiliation and spreading hatred and illusionary fear of the ‘other’ have been the common base of all those oppressive profiteers... Why does the power structure in the world want Islamic thought to be marginalized and remain latent? What concepts and values in Islam disturb the programs of super powers and what interest are safeguarded in the shadow of distorting the image of Islam?”

Khamenei (2015) attempts to rectify this negative image shaping by requesting two actions of young Western Muslims: first, to research the incentives behind the derogatory framing of Islam; and second, to gain direct knowledge of Islam through primary and original sources.

At the core of the shift in ties between the US and Iran, as well as the following four decades of antithetical socio-political encounters, is a lack of understanding and subsequent misrepresentation of Islamic culture, tradition, values, and ideology by Western powers (Saleem, 2007). If one does not take active participation in considering the perspective of the other it is nearly impossible to make amends. Current and past Western rhetoric on Shia Islam has clearly damaged the relationship between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore it is impossible to forgo Islamic perspectives moving forward, if an actively favorable relationship for both nations is achievable.

### **Peace, Pluralism, & Interfaith Activity in Islam**

Despite the widespread narrative of Islam and Muslim communities as inherently violent, scholarly works and cross-cultural historical analyses provide evidence to the contrary (Abu-Nimer, 2013; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009; Said & Funk, 2001). An accurate representation of Islam and its relationship to peace and conflict calls for insight from Muslim scholars who cite Islamic texts and socio-historical Muslim tradition. Therefore the following details scholarly

analyses of Islamic peace and conflict, religious pluralism, and interfaith dialogue. The discussion of these topics also involves a basic understanding of terms and concepts central to Islamic thought, such as *jihad*, *ummah*, *tawhid*, and *ahl al-kitab* among others. Not only is it erroneous to proclaim Islam as inherently violent or non-violent without examining these topics, but also if ethical and effective interfaith activity is to take place a basic understanding of peace, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue from Islamic perspectives must be acknowledged.

### *Peace & Conflict*

Misconceptions about the meaning of jihad and forced conversion have lead Westerners to condemn Islam as militant. The term jihad, often translated as “holy war,” actually means, “struggle.” In truth the phrase “holy war” originated with Christian Crusaders, who used it for their own theological legitimacy for violence (Aslan, 2011). On the other hand, the “struggle” that the Qur’an most often refers to is an inward struggle of the soul. There is both a greater and a lesser jihad. The greater jihad religiously connotes the struggle for holiness, submission to God, and an overcoming of sin; lesser jihad refers to “any exertion – military or otherwise – against oppression and tyranny” (Aslan, 2011). Although the Qur’an does allow for war under stringent conditions, such as fighting for justice with an emphasis and understanding for human life, the preference is for nonviolence and *sabr* (patience) (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). The Qur’an also forbids forced conversion stating, “There is no compulsion in religion: the Truth stands clear from the Wrong” (2:256). This viewpoint is also evident in the Sunnah of the Prophet. In 630 Muhammad returned to Mecca as the conquering ruler, along with his followers, after years of migration and persecution. Amir Hussein (2003) provides a description of the historic account:

“[Muhammad] literally had the power of life and death over those who years earlier had tormented and persecuted him and had killed several of his followers... In the most triumphant of earthly moments, Muhammad chose to display the utmost mercy, and declared total amnesty. In this extraordinary act, he came to those who had persecuted him, and recited to them the words from the Qur’an that Joseph had first spoken to his brothers when they came to him in Egypt, humbled after having sold him earlier into slavery: ‘This day let no reproach be upon you. May God forgive you, and God is the most merciful of those who show mercy’ (12:92). There would be no forced conversion or slaughter of the Meccans.”

Not only have misinterpretations of Islamic concepts, such as jihad, been used to perpetrate the image of Islam as a religion of violence, but also have been used against Muslims by extremists who have risen to power as a result of Western influence and/or been supported financially by Western powers. At times Islamic militants have manipulated the definition of lesser jihad to promote social and political agendas, as apposed to true religious interests (Aslan, 2001). Despite the current narrative of fear and irrationalism, Americans and Europeans are not the primary targets of terrorism. In another letter from Khamenei (2015) to youth in Western countries he says, “The Muslim world has been victim to terrorism and violence more extensively, on a much larger scale, and for a much longer time [than Western nations.]” Additionally, the primary groups perpetrating terrorism (e.g. ISIS, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda) have all at one point been either financially supported by the US or have risen to power partially as a result of power vacuums created by US invasions and subsequent inadequate withdrawals from Middle Eastern countries. Khamenei (2015) continues on this point arguing:

“Military campaigns targeting the Muslim world over recent years, which have taken countless lives, are [an] example of the West’s contradictory logic... I consider the imposition of the Western culture on other nations and belittling independent cultures as a silent and very harmful act of violence. Humiliating rich cultures and insulting their most respected parts are happening while the alternative culture is by no means qualified to supplant them.”

Statistics Global Terrorist Index compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) support Ayatollah Khamenei's claims. In 2015 the top ten countries affected by terrorism were all located in either the Middle East, Africa, or Asia; Furthermore, over 72% of terrorist related deaths occurred in just five of those countries (Dudley, 2016). The GTI defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2014). This is contrary to the common narrative of Western media, which labels such violence as "terrorism" only when perpetrated by individuals of Middle Eastern descent or those who affiliate themselves with Islam. That being said, it is not only important to understand the reality of Islam's misconstrued image, but also to familiarize oneself with true Islamic conceptions of peace and conflict. In doing so one can develop a more realistic image of Islam and attempt to eradicate religious prejudice.

In addition to examples from the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, Shia Muslims in particular typify the acts and deeds of Imam Ali, including his conceptions of war and peace. According to Khamenei (2009), Imam Ali, "the lover of peace and security," participated in acts of war but strived for peacemaking whenever possible. Islamic theology does not necessarily adhere to the ideology of pacifism, but instead upholds justice and the defense of freedom and human rights. Accordingly, there are justifications for war under Islamic law, and evidence of such in the Qu'ran, Hadith, and across Islamic history. Imam Ali sought out negotiation and attempted to avoid bloodshed whenever possible, so that he might not act against the Prophet Muhammad's religion: Imam Ali said, "I will not begin fighting in a war unless I first ask the enemy to arrive at an understanding... If they change their mind and repent, I will accept, and if war is their only choice, I will ask for help from God and then fight them;" On another occasion

Imam Ali said, “I analyzed the pros and cons of [fighting Mu’awiyah (the fifth Islamic/Sunni Caliphate)] and I could not go to sleep anymore. Thus I saw no other choice but to fight him or to deny Islam. As a cure I found war easier than the torture of giving it up, and I found death in this world lighter than death in the other world” (Khamenei, 2009). In Imam Ali’s view, engaging in war as a means of justice is staying true to Islam, as long as all contrary measures are taken to avoid conflict. The choice posed by Imam Ali in Khamenei’s view is to deny the righteousness that can be brought on by justice, or to deny Islam.

The term *ummah*, or religious community, is also essential to the understanding of Islamic peace and peacemaking. Islamic thought developed from a tradition of communalism and an emphasis on the greater good. In Muslim societies the common good comes before that of the individual and as a result, individuals have an obligation toward the community (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). The notion of *ummah*, as a manifestation of divine living bound by human collectivist interest, calls forth individuals to protect one another from harm. Therefore, conflict is viewed as detrimental to both divine and communal harmony (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). Furthermore, *ummah* is not exclusive to Muslims and Muslim communities. In verse 10:19 the Qur’an states, “And [know that] all mankind were once but one single community, and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree – that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled [from outset].” The Qur’an also says, “And indeed within every community **\*\*have We raised up\*\*** an apostle [entrusted with this message]: ‘Worship God and shun the powers of evil!’ And among those [past generations] were people whom God graced with His guidance...” (16:36). These verses not only present humanity as a derivative of a single religious community, but also recognize that the expanse of that single religious community is present throughout various societies and across

generations; all religious communities are therefore considered an *ummah* (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007).

### *Pluralism & Interfaith Dialogue*

As with any new religious tradition, Islam began as a minority and could not have developed without the presence of interfaith dialogue (Hussain, 2003). Before the famous emigration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D., there was a lesser-known emigration to Abyssinia. This migration story is an example of religious pluralism in early Islam and the cooperation of Christian and Muslim societies:

“As people began to accept Islam they met opposition from others in Mecca. This opposition turned to physical persecution against certain members of the early Muslim community. Muhammad gathered a group of those most vulnerable, and instructed them to go across the Red Sea to Abyssinia, a Christian country ruled by a Christian king. There, the emigrants were welcomed and accepted. Indeed, the Christian king protected the Muslims against demands and extradition by the polytheists of Mecca. The emigrants stayed in Abyssinia until they rejoined the larger Muslim community in Medina” (Hussein, 2003).

The Sunnah or life of the Prophet Muhammad is considered exemplary for all Muslims (Hussein, 2003). Accordingly, accounts of interfaith interactions in Islamic history are fundamental to the conceptualization of pluralism across time.

Islamic perspectives on religious pluralism can also be established through an understanding of Islamic universalism. One of the core principles of Islam is the notion of *tawhid*, meaning the oneness of Allah or the “Principle of Unity of God and all being” (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009; Said & Funk, 2001). Islamic monotheism is central to the *shahada*, meaning testimony or declaration of faith. *Shahada* refers to the basic statement, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger,” which includes the declaration of *tawhid* (e.g.

(There is no god but Allah”). Therefore *tawhid* is not just Islamic doctrine, but also an affective center to Islam and a discursive act that Muslims take on wholeheartedly. *Tawhid* as a fundamental grounding for Islamic thought inevitably shapes Islamic conceptions of peace, harmony, and universality. Not only does the concept of *tawhid* dictate one’s personal relationship to God, but also the relations and harmony of all God’s creation; The belief that everything emanates from God establishes the foundation for Islamic universalism to include all fellow human beings, regardless of the socially constructed identities they hold, such as race, nationality, or gender (Said & Funk, 2001; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009).

To acquire a holistic perspective of what religious pluralism means and is, one must also understand what pluralism is not. In his book on Muslim and Christian dialogue, Amir Hussain (2006) details two key themes of religious pluralism. First, pluralism does not mean diversity; Individuals of differing faiths may live in the same area, but if there is no interaction or engagement between them then there is no pluralism. Second, the goal of pluralism and interfaith dialogue is not tolerance, but understanding. Tolerance in this sense is nothing but indifference. Genuine pluralism is based on shared knowledge and coexistence. The Qur’anic term *ta’arafu* can be translated as knowing, understanding, or building relations (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007). Ergo, *ta’arafu* is the cornerstone of Islamic pluralism and interfaith dialogue. Without a commitment to knowledge and open interaction there is no room for productive growth and interaction between various religious groups. Islamic texts call on both Muslims and non-Muslims to recognize their differences and learn from them.

Muslims are constantly reminded of their relationship to *ahl al-Kitab* or People of the Book, commonly referring to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. People of the Book are those who received an earlier revelation from God, and the Qur’an recognizes a peaceful coexistence



between Muslims and those with a shared heritage and common God (Hussein, 2006): “And argue not with the People of the Book unless it be in [a way] that is better, except with such of them as do wrong; and say: ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is One, and to God do we surrender’” (29:46). The Qur’an promotes such sharing with the People of the Book in the hope that it will result in peaceful exchanges and mutual understanding (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007). Another verse from the Qur’an details the righteousness of *ahl al-Kitab*: “Some of the People of the Book are a wholesome nation. They recite God’s signs in the watches of the night, prostrating themselves, having faith in God and the last day, bidding honor and forbidding dishonor, vying with one another in good deeds. They are among the wholesome. Whatever good they do, they will not be denied its reward” (3:113-115). Not only are Muslims reminded of their common relationship with People of the Book, but also that these honorable and righteous non-Muslims will be rewarded for their faithfulness.

These basic concepts of Islamic peace should still be framed within the cultural studies approach to religious literacy. All religions have a variety of beliefs that reflect the clashes and schisms that come with internal diversity. The above ideals of peace are not accepted or understood to the same degree by every Muslim. As previously stated, some may accept the ideal type and others may reject it completely. The degree to which Muslims accept and understand these concepts vary considerably, which can be said for every religion and denomination worldwide. For example, many North American Mennonites consider themselves pacifists, however not all Christians adhere to pacifism. Although an understanding of the basic Islamic conceptions of peace and pluralism are extremely important, it is equally important to recognize that individuals who practice Islam will not all adhere to these ideal beliefs.

### *Interfaith Dialogue in Iran*

When it comes to peace, conflict, and interfaith dialogue, Ayatollah Alavi Boroujerdi argues that people of faith have an obligation to each other and humankind to come together and denounce violence. Particularly during the current societal movements toward materialism, Ayatollah Boroujerdi states that interfaith dialogue is of utmost importance. He continues, saying the common point of all divine religions is that people are responsible for every action they take in this world. Many of the wars and conflict around the world are carried out in the name of religion. As a result of the violation of human ethical values emphasized in religion, millions are suffering. Consequently, people of faith have a responsibility to reflect on the causes for war and suffering in the world, and to determine what to do about them. Ayatollah Boroujerdi questions people of faith asking, “Why are we still seeing so many violations [against people] when we have thousands of mosques, synagogues, and churches?” At the same time, Ayatollah Boroujerdi affirms that, “we should not limit ourselves to condemnation, but come together to find a *practical* solution.” Therefore the goal that Ayatollah Boroujerdi poses is to make connections between people and spread such ethical and moral values to all societies.

In addition to actively seeking connection between individuals of different faith traditions, Iranian religious scholars often cite Qur’anic verses and Shia theology as their framework for engaging in interfaith dialogue from an Islamic perspective. Verse 49:13 in the Qur’an declares: “Oh humanity! Truly We created you from male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know one another. Truly, the most honored/noble of you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious/righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Acquainted.” Amir Hussain (2003) details four notable points in this verse that reflect the Qur’anic view of pluralism and interfaith dialogue. First, the verse is addressed to all of

humanity, not exclusively Muslims. Second, the creation and separation of people into different nations is positively valued and purposefully comes from God. Third, the verse calls upon humanity to transcend those differences in order to learn from one another, thus characteristic of *ta'arafu* and Islamic pluralism. Last, the verse says that the best people are not necessarily Muslim, but those who are righteous and know of God. Numerous Iranians, Islamic scholars, and everyday Muslims (Hussein, 2006; Idliby, Oliver, & Warner, 2007; Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007) cite this particular Qur'anic verse as a cornerstone to Islamic perceptions of interfaith dialogue.

Morteza, a sheikh living in Qom who was interviewed for this study, notes that Islamic mysticism plays a significant role in his conceptualization and engagement in interfaith activities: "I find mysticism and spirituality a common language among all the religious." Islamic mysticism or Sufism is characterized by a sense of esoteric spirituality that can be incorporated into Sunni and Shia interpretations, in addition to standing on its own. Sufism, although practiced across the globe, is often associated with Iran and Shia Islam. For example, Sufism greatly influenced Iranian literature and Shi'a philosophy (Pierce, 2008). Iran was also the first region that Islam expanded to outside of the Arabian Peninsula. According to Hussein (2003) it was the Sufis, or Islamic mystics, who can be credited with spreading Islam throughout the Sasanian Empire of Persia; By living among the people and embracing an ideology of worshiping God for God's sake, Sufis provided a lasting example of how to live a Muslim lifestyle. Even Ayatollah Khomeini adopted the philosophy of Islamic mysticism, writing Sufi poetry about his longing to leave the classrooms of rigid Islamic study and go to the wine cellars to drink the wine of God's love. That being said, Morteza continues the explanation of his interfaith beliefs:

"Islam as a branch of Abrahamic religions and a major religion with many theological, historical, ethical, jurisprudential and mystical teachings has a lot in common with other

major faith traditions and this has made a great ground to open the discussion. What is important for me is to always try to manifest a very logical, moderate, ethical and peaceful account of Islam, as I firmly believe that that is the reality of all the divine religions including Islam. I think that the extremist and exclusivist approaches are deviations that have happened in all the religions and it is upon all of us to try to express our objection with those approaches and promote the true religion of God, which is based on peace and leads to peace.”

For many individuals the basis of interfaith dialogue is finding common elements among different religions. Dr. Amir Akrami contends that Islam and Christianity are not that different: “Even if there are differences, we are still humans with the same commonalities and challenges.” According to Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen (2016), a religious scholar and Shia Muslim convert currently living in Iran, this is known as reductive pluralism. Although an important foundation or steppingstone for those engaging in interfaith dialogue, reductive pluralism focuses on basic similarities rather than a true understanding and appreciation for various religious traditions. Legenhausen asserts that his interpretation of an Islamic perspective on interfaith dialogue “is based on the idea that we need to respect our differences rather than trying to eliminate them. Although I believe that Islam demands a commitment to its own superiority to other religions... It is more important to further understanding than to convince others or to argue about relative merits. I call this approach ‘non-reductive pluralism’.” Non-reductive pluralism highlights and appreciates religious differences by recognizing them as unique divine qualities through which God guides people (Legenhausen, 2016). Consequently, non-reductive pluralism provides an honest and open environment for dialogue in a way that respects and values other religious traditions.

## **Intersection of Interfaith Dialogue & Politics**

The process of interfaith dialogue between the Islamic Republic of Iran and United States is complicated by the fact that the intersection of religion and politics plays vastly different roles in the two countries. In the US, religion is supposed to have little to nothing to do with the political sphere, though its informal presence is indisputable. However, the Iranian political and religious systems are one in the same. As a result, Iranian religious leaders have much more political power in their country than religious leaders do in the United States. Participants in the dialogue process are then in distinct positions: Americans have little influence on politics in their own country, whereas Iranian participants can have a direct impact. This complication sheds light on the delicate intersection between religion and politics on a global scale, in addition to the significance of its function in the dialogue process.

Iranians also participate in interfaith dialogue on a governmental level. Dr. Amir Akrami worked as the Director for the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Iran under President Mohammad Khatami. Khatami's presidency was characterized by open and active promotion of dialogue among civilizations. Roughly 80% of the dialogue conducted by the Center at this time was with Christian representatives from the Vatican, Church of England, Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, and World Council of Churches (WCC). During meetings the groups would examine the history of their relationship and decide a topic for their next discussion. Examples of discussion topics include ethics, law, the role of women, and interpretations of religious texts. Dr. Akrami noted that some challenges to this kind of dialogue involved a degree of mistrust that Iranians often feel toward foreigners (particularly Westerners) coming into their country, in addition to some internal dialogue issues due to the variety of political and ideological differences among Iranian Muslims themselves.

The openness toward interfaith dialogue exhibited by Khatami's government did not necessarily continue into the mid to late 2000's. The activity of the Center for Interreligious Dialogue decreased dramatically and some of the positive progress made was reversed during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose government was characterized by insularity. Nevertheless, the Center is currently in operation under Hassan Rouhani's presidency. The United States also has a governmental organization for political interreligious dialogue introduced under the Obama administration. In 2013, Secretary John Kerry established the Office of Religion and Global Affairs as a sector of the US State Department (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). According to Ed Martin, government officials like John Kerry and Douglas Johnson recognize religion as the gap in American diplomacy. However, since the inauguration of Donald Trump, who some Iranians would consider the "[American] Ahmadinejad," US global interfaith dialogue has also been scaled back.

Due to lack of governmental action, many Americans and Iranians may be skeptical of the ability to produce practical political outcomes via interfaith dialogue. One Iranian scholar who was interviewed, reasons:

"I think it is a mistake to think that interfaith dialogue can make a significant contribution to peace between nations, because peace depends on the decisions of politicians and not on the good will of those who engage in interfaith dialogue. This is not to deny, however, that on occasion good relations fostered by interfaith dialogue can promote lobbying efforts for peace, and sometimes can change a few people's minds so that they are more skeptical about accusations made against members of other nations and faiths in the media... [but] I certainly am under no illusion that learning tours and interfaith dialogues are going to convince people like Trump that sanctions against Iran should be lifted."

In truth, small-scale interfaith activities are not guaranteed to make real, macro political change. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that diplomacy between the US and Iran cannot be reestablished without a religious component. Spiritual belief systems dictate a majority of political action in

Iran as an Islamic Republic. Therefore, a faith aspect is necessary in establishing a foundation for structural change between the two nations.

Furthermore, many other Iranians, including the Deputy Foreign Minister (Dr. Sajjadpour), believe in the positive effects of small-scale interfaith activities. When asked how interfaith dialogue can promote peace between Iran and the US, Iranian scholars are quoted saying, “I think we are living it. When there are good enough people on both sides change can happen. The change might be small, but it is worthwhile;” and “A major solution to the problem is making people talk to each other. You cannot expect change in one day.” Specifically, Dr. Akrami argues that change in social/cross-cultural perceptions (such as the reduction of prejudice) that result from engagement in interfaith activities, whether at an individual or small group level, have a larger and more practical impact than one might believe:

“Unfortunately, a lot of good ideas, such as interfaith dialogue, stay at the level of talk and do not translate into action. A lot of this has to do with politics, but at the same time all of us should bear more responsibility to be more serious about our values and good ideas. I do think that we need to foster a culture of good relationship and dialogue between our intellectuals, ordinary people, athletes, artists, historians and so on to remove a lot of misunderstandings, misperceptions and prejudices that exist between our countries and cultures. Ignorance is the root cause of many problems and interfaith and intercultural dialogue can be the best remedy here.”

Although interfaith dialogue on this level (e.g. dialogue conferences, learning tours, student exchanges) may not directly result in the US government lifting sanctions against Iran, dialogue creates a space for learning that can reduce prejudice and encourage those involved to advocate for practical change.

Political sub-theories of change by means of interfaith dialogue recognize the opportunity for the cooperation of both political and religious leaders to lead to relational and structural change. Relational change reflects an alteration in attitudes of religious followers toward and in

relation to the ‘other;’ when political leaders implement the message of relational change engendered by religious leaders, it can lead to structural change (Neufeldt, 2011). Shia religious leaders in Iran are extremely influential in both the public and private spheres. When Iranian religious leaders publically endorse a particular religious or political message, they can catalyze relational and structural change. According to Neufelt (2011), when politicians give religious leaders a platform to voice religious concerns within the public sphere, religious followers are less likely to engage in violence motivated behavior. Likewise, research shows that individual participation in interfaith groups is an effective catalyst for political participation. A 2017 study (Todd, Boeh, Houston-Kolnik, & Suffrin) on the political action of individuals from 25 interfaith groups across 35 US states found that participation in an interfaith group where individuals share community information and events predicted an increase in political action. As a result, research studies and theories of change support that the incorporation of religion in the political sphere can lead to positive political change.

### *Iran as an Islamic Republic*

Coming from a country built on the foundation of religious freedom, it can be difficult for Americans to rationalize and comprehend the synthesis of a religious state, or implementing interfaith dialogue for means of political peacemaking. “Much of the rest of the world accepts the idea that government must be secular and religion must be private,” states an Iranian scholar. Many Americans view Iran purely as a theocracy rather than a democracy. However, the general public either directly or indirectly elects all Iranian political leaders. Sheikh Rezazadeh argues that Iran is just as much of a democracy as the US, primarily due to America’s Electoral College model. On the other hand, he does admit that a weak point in the Islamic Republic’s democratic



system is the heavy vetting of presidential and parliamentary candidates by religious leaders. Although incorporating politics with religion can be problematic, many of the moral and ethical values based in religious tradition support equality and an appreciation for human life. Ayatollah Boroujerdi advocates for people to incorporate ethical and moral values into politics by encouraging them to endorse political candidates who do not violate people's rights.

When it comes to global conflict, Ayatollah Boroujerdi proclaims that people are not typically the cause, instead it is governments working for their own self-interests. Many Iranians, including the Deputy Foreign minister, recognize the division between government leaders and the general populace: "You cannot equate people with their leaders. Take Stalin or Hitler for example;" "The people are not the same as the government. Government is like chess. [The leaders are the players and we are just the pieces]." Iranian scholars attempt to further explain this separation between 'the government' and 'the people.'

"There are positions of power in Iran which are not directly elected by the people, such as the supreme leader, the head of judiciary and the members of the Guardian Council, as opposed to positions that are directly elected such as the president or members of the parliament. The separation that people talk about refers to this distinction. Many people generally feel that the former is not responsive to their needs and demands while they have a lot of power in their hands and the president, or more generally the executive, do not have enough power to implement their programs that are approved by the people through elections."

"Iranians are often critical of their elected leaders, who are collectively known as "the government" (*doulat*), even though they are generally loyal to the system of Islamic governance (*nezam*). Those who are against the entire system are a small minority, which is over-represented among Iranian expatriates living in Europe and North America. Those who are against the system usually do not care much about which government is in power (e.g. liberals or conservatives). Criticism of the president or his government by Iranians is often misunderstood by Westerners for criticism of the system."

Despite the previously discussed issues with freedom of speech in Iran, even religious scholars are able to be critical of their government and the challenges of having a religious state.

Another Iranian scholar recounts:

“Of course there are challenges [to an Islamic state]... [One] challenge is that since the system in Iran is religious, mistakes made by Iranian governments are taken to reflect badly on Shi'i Islam. Shi'i religious leaders in other countries (e.g. Iraq, India, etc.) might feel slighted because of the dominance of the Iranian religious leadership...”

The perception that mistakes made by the Iranian government reflect poorly on Shia Islam, is also reminiscent of the Islamic Republic's relationship to Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Revolution was built on the theory of Imam Khomeini, a political-religious theory that was not necessarily accepted by all scholars. As a result, criticism of the Islamic Republic can not only appear as a criticism of Shia Islam, but also criticism of Imam Khomeini, who is revered by many as the rescuer of the Iranian people from the Shah and manipulative Western powers.

As devout Muslims who also participate in interfaith activities, many Iranian Shia scholars see the disadvantages of living in an Islamic Republic for those from a minority religious group. Dr. Akrami recalls feeling “caught in the middle” during his work at the Center for Interreligious Dialogue: “Having a religious government has its challenges. On the one hand I want the country to prosper and flourish, and attend to Muslim values. But on the other hand I want to be positive of people of other faiths... The golden rule is to put yourself in others shoes.”

Other religious scholars discuss the treatment of religious minorities in the Islamic Republic:

“I do think that the religious state in Iran, despite its advantages, has failed to bring about a just and prosperous society that we think Islam and the revolution seek to establish. The main reason is that a religious state normally requires giving dominance to a specific interpretation of the religion [Twelver Shiism] and, therefore, other interpretations [e.g. Sunnis, other Shiite sects, etc.] are deprived of being treated on an equal footing, let alone those who do not follow the official religion [e.g. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, etc.], hence it leads to an unjust society where human rights are violated.”

“There are parts of the government, the reformers and moderates in particular, who wish to treat the religious minorities in a just and fair manner but, unfortunately, there are those who, for ideological reasons, think that Islam and Shiism must be given precedence or priority over the adherents of other religions, hence they treat them as second-ranking citizens. Ordinary people in general have historically treated them in a very fair and humane fashion and do think of people of other faiths as equally Iranians with the same rights and responsibilities.”

The faith traditions of the People of the Book are recognized in the 1979 Iranian Constitution and the law forbids any violation of the rights for followers to practice those religions freely. For that reason there is a certain ‘live and let live’ attitude when it comes to the treatment of minority religious groups in Iran. For example, although the consumption of alcohol is illegal in the Islamic Republic, some groups, such as the Armenian Christians, are permitted to have wine in their homes and for religious ceremonies. The government tends to turn a blind eye to such behavior, a fact that many Iranians know and some take advantage of.

Governmentally, religious minorities have their own representation in the Iranian parliament. There are two seats reserved for Armenian Christians, one for the Assyrian Christians, one for the Jewish community, and one seat for the Zoroastrian community (Pierce, 2008). In truth the representation of minority seats in parliament is actually greater than the percentage of minorities in Iranian society. Furthermore, the Iranian government recognizes religious minorities’ legal jurisdiction over their own communities in domestic matters (such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance law) (Pierce, 2008). That being said, certain positions in the Iranian government (mostly those of higher ranks) require individuals to be Muslim.

Despite some laws and other protections for minority religious groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran, most minorities face a number of challenges and institutionalized discrimination. Religious minorities are not allowed to propagate or missionize their religions.

For up to ten years after the Islamic Revolution, the Bible could not be published in Iran. Currently, Muslims are also forbidden to convert from Islam. A Zoroastrian carpet salesman says that he does not like to tell others about his religious identity because he is afraid the government will take his money away. Additionally, since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the Baha'i religious group has been heavily discriminated against and persecuted in Iran. The Baha'i were considered heretics by the *ulema*, heresy or *shirk* in this sense being the most serious sin in Islam. In August 1980 all nine members of the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly of Iran were arrested and never seen again (Axworthy, 2013). The Baha'i faith is not even studied at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom, because the Islamic Republic does not recognize the Baha'i religion.

In a religious state it is nearly inevitable that a particular religion or religious denomination will have preferential treatment. That being said, individuals from some minority religious groups in Iran assert that the country has always been their home and they are content with the freedoms they have. The Jewish community can trace its lineage in Iran back to the Babylonian exile. A Jewish representative from a synagogue in Tehran claims that there are no real challenges for the Jewish community in Iran: "We have our lives, shops, freedom to worship, everything." If needed the Iranian government also provides services and protection to minority religious communities, in addition to allocating funds for the upkeep of Jewish synagogues and Christian churches (Pierce, 2008). Morteza, a Shia Muslim recounts:

"I personally heard from several members of the minority groups, especially Christians and Jews, that many people treat them much kinder when they realize that they belong to the minority groups. A Jewish person told me that every time that he goes to a governmental office, he gets a better reception if he tells them that he is Jewish! This is because in the Iranian popular culture, treating the minorities and also the guests with kindness and respect is very important."

This tradition of kindness and hospitality that Morteza refers to is truly exemplified by the Iranian people. Despite the fears that Westerners may have of Iran, Americans who have traveled to the country speak very highly of how they were welcomed with open arms by everyday Iranians (Shellenberger, 2013). That said, the dichotomy of the government vs. the people consequently infiltrates daily social interaction, in addition to the spheres of economics, politics, and religion.

### **Implementation of Interfaith Dialogue & Peacemaking**

Open engagement is a mode of peacemaking that refuses to permit division and illusory powers to define whom one's enemies are (Huebner, 2016). In the case of the United States and Iran, past administrations have determined the enemy status that has nearly irradiated any diplomacy between the two countries. When it comes to development and peacebuilding strategies, governmental self-interest is often at odds with the needs and well-being of local populations (Theissen, 2013). That being said, current interfaith engagement outside of the political realm has reopened avenues for positive relations between the US and Iran. Iranian religious scholars engaging in interfaith work contend that, "[Interfaith dialogue can promote peace between the US and Iran by] making more opportunities for encountering and dialoging on our common crisis with mutual respect and balanced rights." This sense of mutual respect requires a synthesis of Western and Islamic interfaith dialogue practices. It is insufficient to apply dialogue practices that maintain the status quo, or to simply impose western models without acknowledging their limitations, particularly in a multi-cultural setting (Abdullah, Akay, Hassanzadeh & Tabari, 2016). The following provides an analysis of an Islamic model for dialogic peacemaking practices and values, as well as a cross-cultural example of interfaith

activity by Christian Americans in a Muslim majority region.

### *Islamic Studies Model for Conflict Analysis - C.R. SIPPABIO*

Western conflict resolution techniques are implemented with implicit cultural assumptions, including an emphasis on individualism, materialism, and cost-benefit analyses (Abu-Nimer, 2013). Furthermore, these Western models often assume the core problem is in communication, an analysis that discounts deeply rooted structural conflicts and the asymmetric power structures at play (Abu-Nimer, 2013). For this reason it is unproductive to implement a solely Western dialogue model in this cross-cultural context. Nevertheless, faculty and students at the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS) in Virginia illustrated a framework for conflict analysis that provides an avenue for peacemaking from an Islamic perspective [see Appendix Figure 2.1]. This model, referred to as C.R. SIPPABIO (Context, Relationship, Sources, Interests, Positions, Parties, Attitudes/Feelings, Behavior, Intervention and Outcome/Stage), was developed to ease the analysis of the different stages of conflict resolution (Abdullah et al., 2016). The most important elements of this conflict analysis framework are conflict elements, contextual factors, and the relationship between the parties involved (Abdullah et al., 2016). The contextual factors were previously discussed in the beginning of this research. That said, the conflict elements and relationship between the US and Iran must be further broken down and examined in order to fully understand the applications, values, and limitations of the C.R. SIPPABIO model.

## Conflict Elements

According to the C.R.SIPPABIO model there are eight essential elements of conflict: sources, interests, positions, parties, attitudes, behavior, intervention, and outcome (Abdullah et al., 2016). These conflict elements and the means of addressing them are rooted in Islamic perspectives of conflict intervention. In order to illustrate the conflict elements most central to the case of the United States and Iran, there will be an examination of conflict interests, parties and intervention, in addition to how each are enacted and conceptualized from an Islamic perspective.

The dimensions of interests from an Islamic perspective relate to the duality of preventing harm and causing good. In keeping with Abdullah, et al. (2016), “any interest preventing good or causing harm to the individual or society, whether it is in this life or in the hereafter” is not considered a real goal in an Islamic value system. The dualism of preventing harm while also causing good therefore involves Islamic ideals of collectivism and is not limited to this lifetime. In believing in the accountability of the Day of Judgment, the reward or punishment of God in the hereafter, Muslims struggle to be just and fair in their relationships and goals in conflict resolution (Abdullah et al., 2016). Goals in the dualistic model can be positive or negative: positive goals are aimed toward *attaining* a desired future outcome, while negative goals involve the *avoidance* of an unwanted future state (Abdullah et al., 2016). Arguably the United States has a positive goal of *attaining* control and security over the Iranian economy, in doing so maintaining the safety of the American public and American governmental interests. On the other hand, Iran has a negative goal of *avoiding* economic depression and Western dominance. The interests of the parties in conflict are consequential in reaching a point of negotiation and determining the role of the parties involved.

From an Islamic perspective, the role of parties is embedded in the notion of *ummah* rather than the Western emphasis on autonomy. In the Quran, God commands Muslims to single out individuals within the *ummah* to act as representatives to fulfill the interests of the greater good: “Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoying what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; they are the ones to attain felicity; Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoying what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah” (3:104; 3:110). Not only does God command Muslims to choose those of good nature among them as leaders, but also extolls those leaders for the goodness they enact for the community. The members of the *ummah* and the leaders representing them are both considered parties in a conflict scenario. Parties as another conflict element refer to the individuals, groups, communities or nations participating in a conflict. Parties can be divided into three levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in terms of their relation to and distance from a particular conflict. Primary parties are those who have a direct vested interest in the conflict (e.g. American and Iranian governmental leaders); secondary parties are those who are indirectly vested in or affect by the conflict (e.g. the American and Iranian general public); Tertiary parties are distant from the conflict but still have a degree of vested interest (e.g. European Union, United Nations) (Abdullah et al., 2016). Tertiary parties often act as mediators when the primary parties have reached a stalemate in negotiation. That said, the role of parties is crucial to conflict resolution and deciding whether third party intervention is necessary.

When it comes to negotiating conflict intervention observations and themes from Islamic sources emphasize a preference for parties to make their own settlements. The following *ayah* from the Quran addresses this outcome superiority in conflict resolution: “If they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such a settlement is best; even though men’s souls



are swayed by greed. But if you do good and practice self-restraint, Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do” (4:128). The ethics of conflict intervention or mediation relate specifically to relationships and balances of power. Neutrality is of utmost importance in conflict mediation, however the involvement of a third party brings questions of ethics to light: Is empowering a weaker party as a mediator being neutral? Can one truly be neutral if there is an imbalance of power? (Abdullah et al., 2016). These questions are central to the discussion of intervention, parties, and goals and must be examined in depth if third party negotiation is needed in a conflict scenario.

## Relationship

There are three components that contribute to the examination of relationship in the C.R. SIPPABIO model: power, pattern, and bond (Abdullah et al., 2016). Both the C.R. SIPPABIO model and the cultural studies model to religious literacy call for an analysis of the power dynamics involved in social conflict. There are various types of power, and in the case of the United States and Iran the US has clear resource and procedural power. The following are definitions of these powers according to Abdullah et al. (2016): *Resource power*: The power derived from being in control over resources; *Procedural power*: The power that one enjoys from being in charge of decision-making procedures. Currently, the US has numerous sanctions in place that deny Iranian’s access to resources (from nuclear power to medication) and have significantly damaged the Iranian economy over the past five to ten years. Furthermore, US procedural power originates from the Western ethnocentric ideals attached to orientalism. The United States has used its influence in the global sphere to manipulate Middle Eastern resources and encourage other nations to do the same. The power imbalance between the US and Iran must

be addressed and reexamined if legitimate conflict resolution and peacemaking practices are to ensue.

In addition to power, relationship in conflict analysis also involves pattern. Participating parties often resort to and repeat certain patterns of behavior during conflict situations (Abdullah et al., 2016). From an Iranian perspective, one of the patterns that the US government historically adheres to is the constant implementation of sanctions and other restrictions that reinforce the unjust US domination over the Middle East. Dr. Ed Martin contents that the one of the true sources of historic animosity, from an American perspective, is Iran's insistence on being independent. When Khomeini came into Iran as a rising leader he made it clear to the Iranian people that their nation was to be independent; Iran was not going to be part of the Soviet block or in an alliance of NATO. Martin claims that the Iranian insistence on sovereignty and self-determination was difficult for the United States to accept, considering the influence the US government had over Iran when the Shah was in place. On the other hand, a pattern that has been exhibited by the Iranian government is the nation's reluctance and at times complete disregard for the regulations (namely nuclear) imposed by the United States and United Nations. These conflict behaviors coincide to create a pattern where the US continues to restrict Iranian behavior when it interferences with American interest, and Iran continues to assert its right to self-governance as a free nation. Inevitably, if this pattern continues it will only worsen the degree of antithesis and no concrete change will be made.

The final component of relationship in the C.R. SIPPABIO model is bond. The bond or attachment between parties within a conflict is tied to cultural meaning and social roles (Abdullah et al., 2016). Accordingly, the C.R. SIPPABIO model emphasizes the establishment of an equally understood bond. For the case of Iran and the United States this bond could be labeled

differently depending on who labels and determines it (e.g. enemy vs. ally). The importance then, is a shared understanding of what the current bond is between parties and what both parties expect and wish that bond to be (whether it is the same or different as the current attachment). The three components of relationship (power, pattern, and bond) are central to understanding the current conflict and play a significant role moving forward with peacemaking strategies. From an Islamic perspective, the way in which people operate and conceptualize relationship has dualistic properties. Based in the concept of *tawheed* as the cornerstone of Islam, Muslims engage in a dual dimensional relationship, relating to both the vertical and horizontal: The vertical aspect of this Islamic relationship refers to Muslims' relationship with God, while the horizontal relates to how Muslims engage with and relation to others, in a way that recognizes others as a part of creation according to divine revelation (Abdullah et al., 2016). Both dimensions are valuable from an Islamic perspective, because building Islam in oneself involves Muslims fulfilling their duty to Allah and to His creation (Abdullah et al., 2016).

## Limitations

Islamic models of peacemaking are extracted from and dictated in the Qur'an and Sunnah as divine sources (Abdullah et al., 2016). The challenges that arise are then indicative of the source material, and the rationalization and interpretation of abstract religious doctrine by human subjects. As is true with all religions, disagreement in the interpretation of religious texts and doctrine can lead to internal conflict and even division in religious communities (e.g. Sunnis and Shiites, Catholics and Protestants). As a result, the variety of interpretations can also lead to variation in peacemaking models. Religion and faith value are not quantifiable, so compartmentalizing them to be applied to a tangible, measurable model can be problematic.

Additionally, utilizing a conflict resolution model that is centered on religious doctrine ignores those involved in the conflict, who do not participate in or adhere to a particular religious belief system. Secular elements are also valuable to examine and include in any conflict resolution model, particularly when the parties involved have secular values. What is difficult for many religious individuals to understand is that the absence of religious faith does not always mean the absence of morality. The process of adapting conflict resolution tools to include an Islamic reality is necessary for relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. That said, a true holistic method of peacemaking demands a synthesis of the cultural value systems of all parties involved: Western and Eastern, American and Iranian, Christian and Islamic, religious and secular.

#### *Cross-Cultural Example of Interfaith Work in Zanzibar*

Due to the elements of power that influence global relationships, it is of upmost importance to examine the role of Westerners coming into a Muslim majority region and engaging in interfaith peacemaking. Peter and Christy Sensenig are a Christian-American couple who work and live (along with their two young children) in Zanzibar, a Muslim majority archipelago off the coast of East Africa. Similar to the demographic break down of Iran, Zanzibar's population is roughly 98% Muslim. In Zanzibar, Christy works as a healthcare professional under the Health Improvement Project, while Peter works at the Zanzibar Interfaith Center teaching intercultural relations. Living and working in Zanzibar provides the Sensenig's with a rich context for interfaith and intercultural knowledge sharing and peacemaking.

Although the group of islands is officially part of the mainland (Christian majority) Tanzania, Zanzibar has its own parliament and presidency, influenced by Islamic jurisprudential

governance [This does not mean Sharia law]. The Sensenigs address the difficulty of combining religion and politics, and the need to steer clear of political interference as a Westerner. “It is not wise for Western expats to come into a Muslim majority country and be overtly political in any sort of way. We don’t want to be perceived as critical of Islam in a way that closes dialogue,” Sensenig says. At the same time, Peter Sensenig wonders how political leaders view global interfaith interactions: “Surely they’re able to see the value in developing a civil society in which respect is [of chief importance], right? I don’t think that governments would be ambivalent about this sort of thing, but [rather interfaith dialogue is] something that they would want to promote.”

Many governments and individuals who are opposed to engaging in interfaith dialogue adhere to the stereotypes that those participating are compromising their faith and do not take their faith seriously. There is a misconception that in order to have meaningful dialogue one has to water down their particular views and only focus on commonality, a view that is reminiscent of reductive pluralism. However, dictating interfaith engagement by these misconceptions delegitimizes dialogue and, in a sense, dehumanizes the other. The Sensenigs challenge Christians to consider the dangers of this ideology as a religious community: “Do we put anything, including our deepest-held religious convictions, above the human dignity and value of the people around us? Human need and human dignity trumps everything, including religion. Therefore it is important to recognize and address what the Sensenigs refer to as “blind spots,” or any convictions that hold individuals back from seeing the human dignity in others.

According to the Sensenigs, “privilege comes with blind spots,” and Westerners can easily fall into the trap of the white-savior complex. The white-savior complex adheres to orientalist attitudes that promote Westerners as superiors who are thus able to come into foreign nations and act as the heroes, while the native population is portrayed as helpless and

consequently needing saved. Colonial ethnocentrism clearly persists into modern day international relations. Therefore, a dialogic approach to interfaith peacemaking requires delicate communication, an understanding of power dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence among other traits. Ultimately, acting as a Westerner in this role requires respect. For the Sensenig's, respect in this context means learning Swahili (the official language of Tanzania/Zanzibar), dressing in a culturally appropriate manner (often wearing hijab/head covering as a woman), and affirming cultural-religious activities (such as fasting and prayer).

Not only are there challenges to entering into global interfaith work as a Westerner, but also gaining the support to engage in such work from other Western sources. The Sensenig family receives financial support almost exclusively from congregations in the United States and individual donors. That being said, more often than not Christian organizations will allocate funds toward traditional evangelism, which measures its success on conversion rather than mutual respect and peacemaking. According to Peter Sensenig, churches and donors expect to hear that the opportunity to share the Gospel is taken advantage of, but that is exactly what most Muslims fear. Christy Sensenig argues that, "when you enter into debate it can stand in the way of people actually encountering Jesus." Laughing, Peter Sensenig adds, "I don't have any urgency about saving Muslims from anything. I value our Muslim friends and I like the freedom to see people as people, not really thinking of them in terms of what I would hope they would be." In order to navigate this relationship between Western funding and traditional Western ideals of evangelism, the Sensenigs attempt to present the reality of their vision, which can challenge some Christians' assumptions of what mission should be. The Sensenigs hope that in sharing knowledge of cultural context and the limitations of the traditional model of Christian

missionary work, Christian sponsors will find themselves wondering what it looks like to bear witness to faith that is centered on Jesus but is also very respectful of Muslims.

Although there are numerous challenges to entering into a Muslim majority region and engaging in interfaith dialogue as a Westerner, the process can be extremely productive with an open and understanding mindset. Peter Sensenig recalls attending a dialogue conference in Uganda hosted by Campalla University (an Islamic University in the Christian majority country). The main gathering including more than a thousand Muslims, Christians, religious officials, community leaders, and university students. During a discussion on the book, “A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue” by David Shenk and Badru Kateregga, Sensenig sat beside the Iranian Ambassador to Uganda. At one point the Iranian Ambassador turned to Sensenig and said, “We need to get this book in Farsi.” Sensenig contends that it takes significant power and influence to make something like the translation of an interfaith dialogue book to come to fruition, especially in a context such as Iran where religious resources are heavily guarded. Be that as it may, many Iranians recognize the positive impact that interfaith engagement can have on civil society and international relations. Accordingly, Westerners entering into these spaces must be held accountable by participating in interfaith interactions with certain cultural understandings, so as not to inflict further damage.

## META-COMMUNICATIVE TOUR ANALYSIS

The meta-communicative aspect of this research project involves a critical analysis and description of a learning tour in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which I participated in. The tour took place between April 7<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 and was sponsored by the International Institute for Islamic Thought and Hikmat International Institute for Oriental Wisdom and Spirituality (formerly the Hikmat International Institute for Religious and Cultural Studies). This analysis includes a broad overview of the trip itinerary as well as tour group demographics and examples of interfaith exchange of knowledge. The learning tour was orchestrated for the purpose of educating Americans and Canadians on Iranian culture and religion, with a primary focus on Shia Islam. For that reason much of the time in Iran was spent visiting various Shia mosques and shrines, historical sites, religious and educational foundations, local restaurants, traditional bazaars, and Iranian homes. Representatives from the Jewish community in Tehran, Armenian Christians in Isfahan, and Zoroastrians in Yazd were also visited and interviewed. In offering this meta-communicative overview readers have the opportunity to gain insight into the current interfaith activities taking place in the Islamic Republic of Iran and their effectiveness in educating foreign Westerners on different aspects of the country's culture. Although the following analysis is written in a less academic and more user-friendly format, it provides a realistic window into the experience of participating in interfaith cultural exchange.

### **Experiencing Iran**

Immediately upon landing in Tehran, a message came over the intercom requesting all women to cover their heads in accordance with the laws of the Islamic Republic. I was in a new country, a new culture; this time I was the "other." Our tour group spent sixteen days traveling



across Iran to six different major cities (Tehran, Qom, Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, and Mashhad) [See Figure 2.1 for a general map of our travels]. Our group consisted of five Canadians, twelve Americans, and our two Iranian guides Morteza and Sayyed. Roughly 80 percent of our American-Canadian group identified as Christian (nearly half of whom consider themselves Mennonite), while the remaining individuals included a Muslim woman, a male Zoroastrian priest, and a Jain couple. Our tour guides, of course, were both devout Shia Muslims.

The application process for acquiring visas to the Islamic Republic of Iran was more intensive for the American nationals compared to our Canadian counterparts. The Canadian nationals taking part in the Iranian cultural tour received verification for their visa acceptances by early February, but we Americans were left waiting in the dark until March 28<sup>th</sup>, a week and a half before our scheduled departure. As a university student conducting research approved and supported by a state university, I had additional hoops to jump through. Luckily I was allowed to travel with a tourist visa rather than a student visa, a difficulty that likely would have prevented me from traveling to Iran altogether. Additionally, due to the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran is on the US State Department travel advisory warning list under the level “do not travel,” I was required to sign forms stating that Kutztown University was not liable for any type of ransom if I were kidnapped during my travels. There were three individuals (2 American and 1 Canadian) who’s visa requests were rejected, and therefore could not join us on the trip. As is the case with nearly any nation and visa processes, we were given no answer or justification for their rejection. Additionally one of the individuals rejected, Harry Huebner a Canadian, had traveled to Iran numerous times before.

The first site we visited on our cultural tour was one of the summer palaces of Mohammad Reza Shah. The palace was filled with intricate plaster carvings and walls covered in

cloth with bulletproof windows. The air itself was filled with a sense of decadence. After viewing a small fraction of the luxury enjoyed by the Pahlavi Shahs, our group drove to the humble residence of the late Ayatollah Khomeini. The juxtaposition of these leaders' lifestyles was extremely powerful to witness. Looking into the room where the Ayatollah met with presidents, prime ministers, and kings, we saw a single rugged couch covered with a plain white bed sheet. The room was nearly empty except for a couple pictures and books, compared to the Shah's official dining halls filled with rows of ornate furniture and 100 square yards of silk rugs hand made by 9-year-old children. Pondering these extremes, you begin to feel a humble respect for the Ayatollah Khomeini and the place that he holds in the hearts of the Iranian people.

Outside of traveling to religious and cultural sites, a significant portion of the tour was dedicated to formal meetings with scholars and representatives from various institutions and religious groups. These institutions included the Iranology Foundation & Museum, Tehran Peace Museum, and University of Religions and Denominations. Arguably the most noteworthy interview was with the Representative of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Qom. Before the meeting, our group was given a tour of the museum where al-Sistani keeps all of the priceless gifts he/his representative receives from the kings and government leaders he is typically in dialogue with. These gifts ranged from hand painted boomerangs from Australia to engraved swords from Saudi kings. The most precious gift, however, was a magnificent Qur'an made with 313 Iraqi Dur-e Najaf gemstones, engraved with more than a hundred *surahs* (verses). Our meeting with the Representative, and son-in-law, of al-Sistani lasted for several hours including coffee and lunch. According to our Iranian guides, ordinary people would be lucky to have only fifteen minutes with an Iranian cleric of this status. Contrarily, we were welcomed without

hesitation, went through absolutely no form of security, and left with full minds and full stomachs.

Although the learning tour was centered around our formal dialoguing sessions, it was the cultural sharing that took place through informal dialogue that gave the truest picture of the Iranian people. Informal dialogue took place during many walks of our tour. Meals at local restaurants and strolls through luscious Persian gardens provided unique opportunities for interaction with everyday Iranians. It was during these chance opportunities that I began to learn what Iranian culture really was. You can see Iranian culture in the difference of head coverings between the women wearing all black *chadors* in Qom and the more progressive women in Isfahan, struggling to keep their hijabs perched ever so slightly on the backs of their heads. You can hear Iranian culture in the soft speech of a 7-year-old girl reciting poetry at the Shrine of Hafez, or the intensely mesmerizing vibrato of a man singing to his guests at a dinner party.

Iran is more than just an Islamic Republic; it is a nation built on the great history of the various Persian empires. Yet, in the shadows of these historic landmarks, you can also see the loss of Iranian culture at the hands of Western greed. Walking through the minimalistic exhibits at the National Museum of Iran, you feel a sense of history missing. The gift shop sells replicas of the famed Cyrus cylinder, a prized Persian artifact dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which is kept not in the National Museum of Iran, but in the British Museum in London. I felt ashamed walking through museums and the mighty ruins of Persepolis, coming from a history that built itself on the exploitation of other great nations and people.

The last stop of our trip was the northern city of Mashhad, which is home to the Shrine of Imam Reza, the second largest shrine in the world (the first being the Ka'ba Shrine in Mecca). The night we arrived in Mashhad was the birthday celebration of Imam Hussein. As we walked

the streets people handed out candies and tea to everyone who passed. In addition to the magnificent cultural sights of Mashhad, this is where we had the culmination of our interfaith exchange. During a conference hosted by the faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies at Ferdowsi University, five Iranian representatives from the University faculty along with three American representatives from our group shared research and experience on a variety of interfaith topics. These topics included (but were not limited to): methodology on peaceful interpretations of Islam, the life example of Emir Abdulkadir, interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians in the US, peacemaking courtship, and the use of water as a tool of war. Following the conference our group enjoyed lunch with the university faculty and had the opportunity to continue these discussions in a more informal setting. After our dialogue conference at Ferdowsi University, our group enjoyed a goodbye coffee and reception together, reflecting on the joys of our travels and receiving gifts of fresh Persian saffron from our gracious hosts.

## **Returning Home**

Finding your way home after a life-changing travel experience is always bittersweet. The sad truth about leaving Iran in April 2017 is the reality that there is no certainty of your return. The current relationship between the US and Iran is too unpredictable and with Trump's international agenda, conditions are only getting worse. So you find yourself taking just a few more pictures and trying to memorize every crease in the smiling faces of your Iranian companions and hosts, because you do not know if you will ever see them again. But returning home also means sharing the true Iran with America. During our time with the Representative of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, he made one request of our group: "Go home and tell [America] how

you were treated here. How the Muslims treated you here.” I can wholeheartedly say that nowhere else in the world have I been shown such unadulterated hospitality as I experienced in Iran. Whether it was being given food and invitations for home-cooked dinners by Muslim women walking through the gardens of Tehran, or being showered with gifts as honored guests of the Zoroastrian community in Yazd, Iranian hospitality was felt by every one of our group during nearly every moment of our travels. For many foreigners, being an “other” in Iran is being treated as a guest.

For those who are “othered” in the US as a religious minority, returning home to the United States can be a harsh reminder of that reality. This is the case for my friend Awatef, who despite the fact that she is an American citizen and has lived in the US for decades, is treated differently than most Americans due to her religious identity as a Muslim. After arriving home I received an email from Awatef describing her experience traveling home from Iran:

“Landing in New York from Istanbul, I was greeted almost at the door of the airplane by a security officer (who was apparently waiting for me). For about 90 minutes I was asked to give information about my family and purpose of my visit to Iran and the places I visited. I explained that I was part of an interfaith group in a learning tour to learn about the history and culture of Iran. The agent was pleasant and courteous, however he searched my suitcases and he asked for my phone, which he took to another agent. I do not know if he downloaded anything. I was too tired to question his request. I hope that no one should be apprehended at an airport with no valid reason, just for having a certain faith or for coming from a certain place.”

In comparison, I landed in Baltimore after flying from Vienna. Traveling with an older male family friend (of no blood relation), I walked into the short Mobile Passport line after finding my way off the plane. Stepping into place at the front of the line, the US customs officer simply asked me where I had traveled and what I did there. I answered that I was coming from Iran, where I participated in an interfaith cultural tour. He scanned my passport, stamped my forms and let me pass with ease. The officer called my family friend, Patrick Brady, next. All Patrick

told the officer was that he was traveling with me, and the officer asked no further questions; he scanned, stamped, and we were free to go.

In my own experience, I now expect to be chosen for additional “random screening” when flying internationally, due to my flight records and having an Iranian visa in my passport. However, my encounters with extra security screenings pale in comparison to the relative interrogations awaiting Awatef. One’s religious or national identity should not preclude ethical treatment. Discrimination and prejudice against another’s identity is a significant breach in human dignity and a major cause of conflict (Abdullah et al., 2016). Although the multitudes of identities we hold (religious, ethnic, racial, gender, etc.) specifically shape our sense of self, it is our shared human identity that should dictate our interactions with others. The following Persian poem by the famous Shirazi Sa’adi (1210-91) exemplifies the salience of a shared human identity:

Human beings are members of one another  
All created from the same precious jewel.  
When, in the course of life,  
Pain comes to a member,  
The other members cannot remain at peace.  
When you do not grieve at the suffering of others  
You cannot be called by the name “human.”

This poem is not only on the tongues of nearly every Iranian, but also inscribed above the entryway to the United Nations building in New York City (Shellenberger, 2013). No American should be interrogated at the airport due to their particular religious identity, and no Iranian should be kept from traveling to the United States because of where they were born.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a Muslim-centric approach to interfaith dialogue, in order to emphasize a sense of cross-cultural understanding to a primarily Western-Christian audience. Collaborative efforts from Iranian locals and Mennonite communities in the United States and Canada have opened up the opportunity for religious peacemaking for both inter- and intra-state purposes. Documenting the unique relations of interfaith dialogue within the Islamic Republic of Iran can inform innovative peacemaking strategies to religious conflicts and anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and abroad. Additionally, this research has the potential to not only innovate, but also reestablish diplomatic ties between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran. The significance associated with understanding the perspective of the ‘other’ is paramount for the success of any social relationship, including those within the sphere of international diplomacy.

The American image-framing of Iranians and Muslims as the stranger, a demonized other rooted in ethnocentric orientalist attitudes, has a continual negative impact on international diplomacy and domestic affairs. The underlying assumptions plaguing Islam as a religion of radicalism and violence is often based in hypocrisy and ignores a holistic view of religion and how religion manifests in society. By incorporating Iranian Shia Muslim perspectives on topics of peace, interfaith engagement, and religion’s intersection with politics, this study provides an example of fresh cross-cultural communication and understanding. Additionally, the inclusion of a relational peacebuilding model (C.R.SIPPABIO) grounded in Islamic principles and values sets the tone for mutual respect and collaborative peacemaking. That being said, an acknowledgement of the power dynamics involved with such conflicts is also essential to the realistic development of positive change between the US and Iran. The complex role of

Westerners entering into foreign nations with unfamiliar socio-religious practices is riddled with colonial undertones. For this reason, examples of Christian-Americans entering into these roles in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner must be highlighted. Lastly, an appreciation of small successes in cultural exchange and interfaith knowledge sharing support the comprehension of change as a process, requiring constructive effort from political leaders, researchers, NGO's, and ordinary citizens alike.

When it comes to the current debate, scholars and politicians question how much religion should be incorporated into politics and why dialogue with the Islamic Republic of Iran is necessary. The inherently antagonistic stance of closing oneself off and refusing to speak with another is what requires justification; dialogue is its own justification (Huebner, 2016). Furthermore, politicians often fail to acknowledge the socio-cultural importance of religion and its intersection with the political sphere. Therefore a basic understanding of religious literacy as stated in the cultural studies approach is absolutely necessary when engaging in diplomacy with a religious state, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Progressive Mennonite communities (often associated with Mennonite Central Committee) arguably have the greatest potential to foster peaceful dialogue with Iran, based on their current and past relational exchanges, as well as their shared philosophical/spiritual framework. Given the current evolution of the American political stance toward the Islamic Republic of Iran and the widening of intolerance, conducting research, heightening advocacy, and the development and implementation of concrete steps toward peace are extremely valuable and relevant.

Further research on this topic should include continual analyses of current interfaith activity with the Islamic Republic of Iran both within and without government intervention. Although there are few sources of this information between the US and Iran, analyses of more



positive relations between Iran and European nations (such as Germany) could be extremely insightful moving forward. Unfortunately, Western news sources and accounts detailing past and current conditions in Iran relating to democracy and attitudes toward America are often unreliable and misconstrued. Therefore, journalists and researchers alike have a responsibility not only to cite accurate sources, but also to conduct ethical and veracious primary research. When truth is swept under the rug, radicalism overrides ethics, and ethnocentrism dictates diplomacy, the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran both suffer. Individuals and leaders of both nations owe it to themselves, to the other, and to the world to foster mutual respect and harmony. Currently, interfaith dialogue provides an avenue for that very sentiment. If one nation is reaching out their hand in a gesture of peace, human dignity dictates the need to take it.

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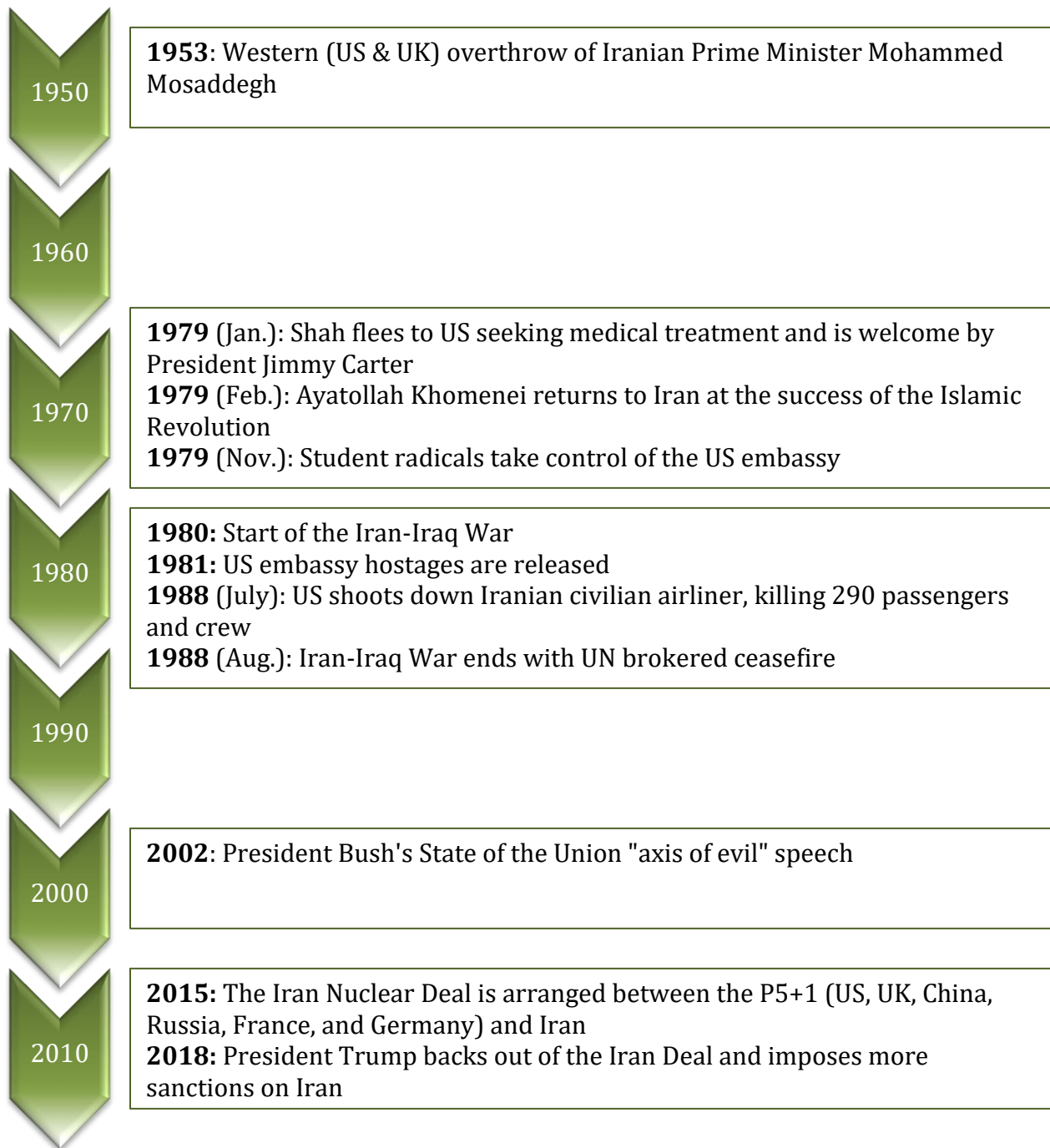
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## APPENDIX

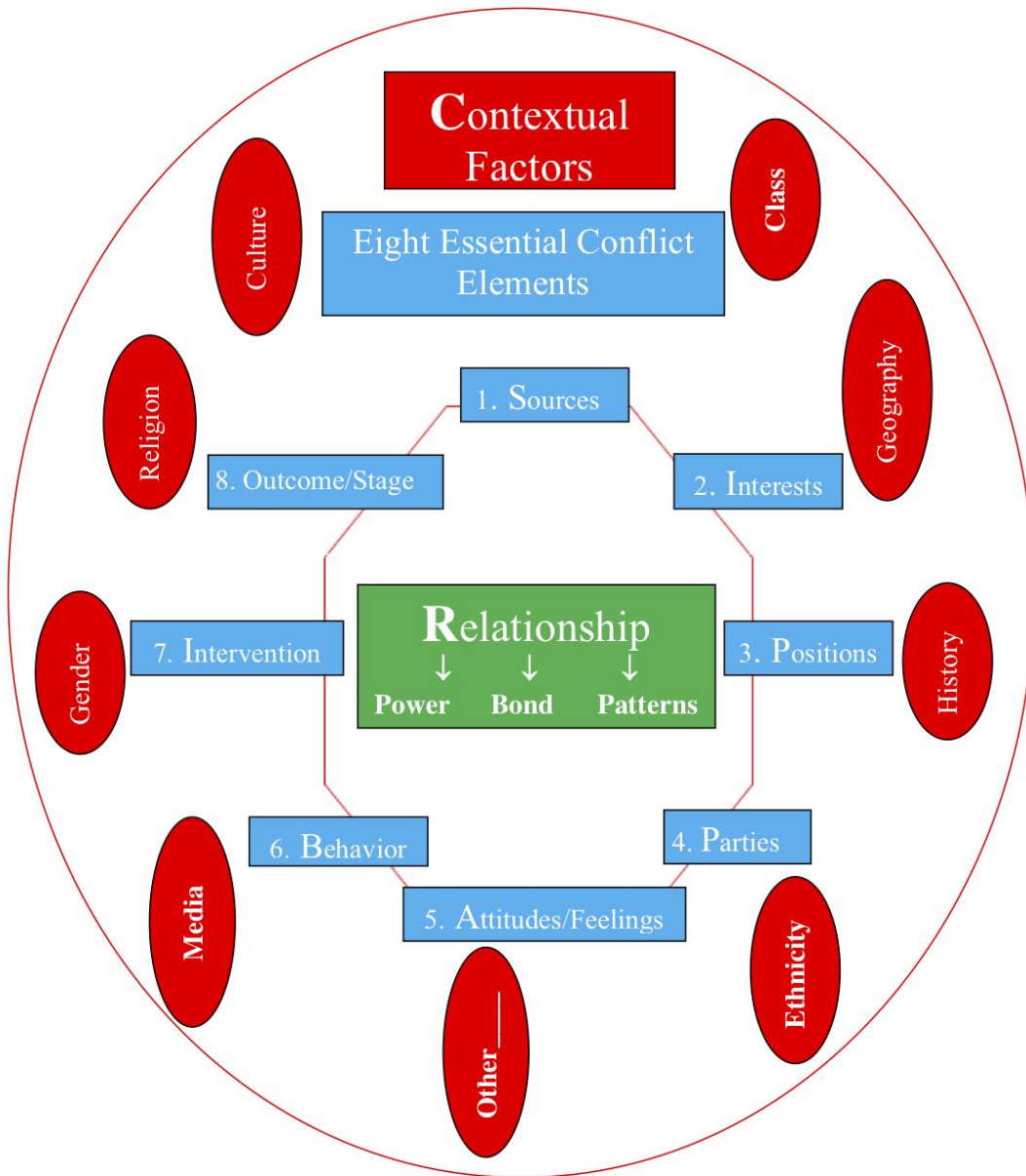
### Figures

1.1

#### Timeline of Important Dates in Iran-US History



**C.R. SIPPABIO**  
**A Framework for Conflict Analysis**



3.1

Map of Travel Across Iran





## Photos



*Photographed by: Sayed Ruhollah Rastitubar*

*Tehran*

Group photo of our American-Canadian tour group and guide Morteza (far right)





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Tehran*

Golestan Palace, the former royal complex of the Qajar Dynasty



*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Tehran*

View of Tehran skyline from the Milad Tower





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Tehran*

Iranian women enjoying a picnic at the Garden of Tulips



*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

Tehran street with signs/photos of Ayatollah Khamenei (left) and Ayatollah Khomeini (right)





*Photographed by: Calvin Friesen*

*Yazd*

Our wonderful tour guides/friends, Sayed (left) and Morteza (right)



*Photographed by: Calvin Friesen*

*Shiraz*

Morteza with his son Ali at the Shrine of Hafez



*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Qom*

Tomb of unknown Iranian soldiers from the Iran-Iraq War. A sign outside the tomb reads, "The Blessed Resting Place of 14 Anonymous Martyrs Who Gave Their Lives for Islam in the Holy 8 Year Defense (1980-1988) Against Saddam's Tyrant Regime, And the Arrogant Superpowers Supporting It."





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Tehran*

Meeting with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Dr. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour (center). Ed Martin sits next to him (left).

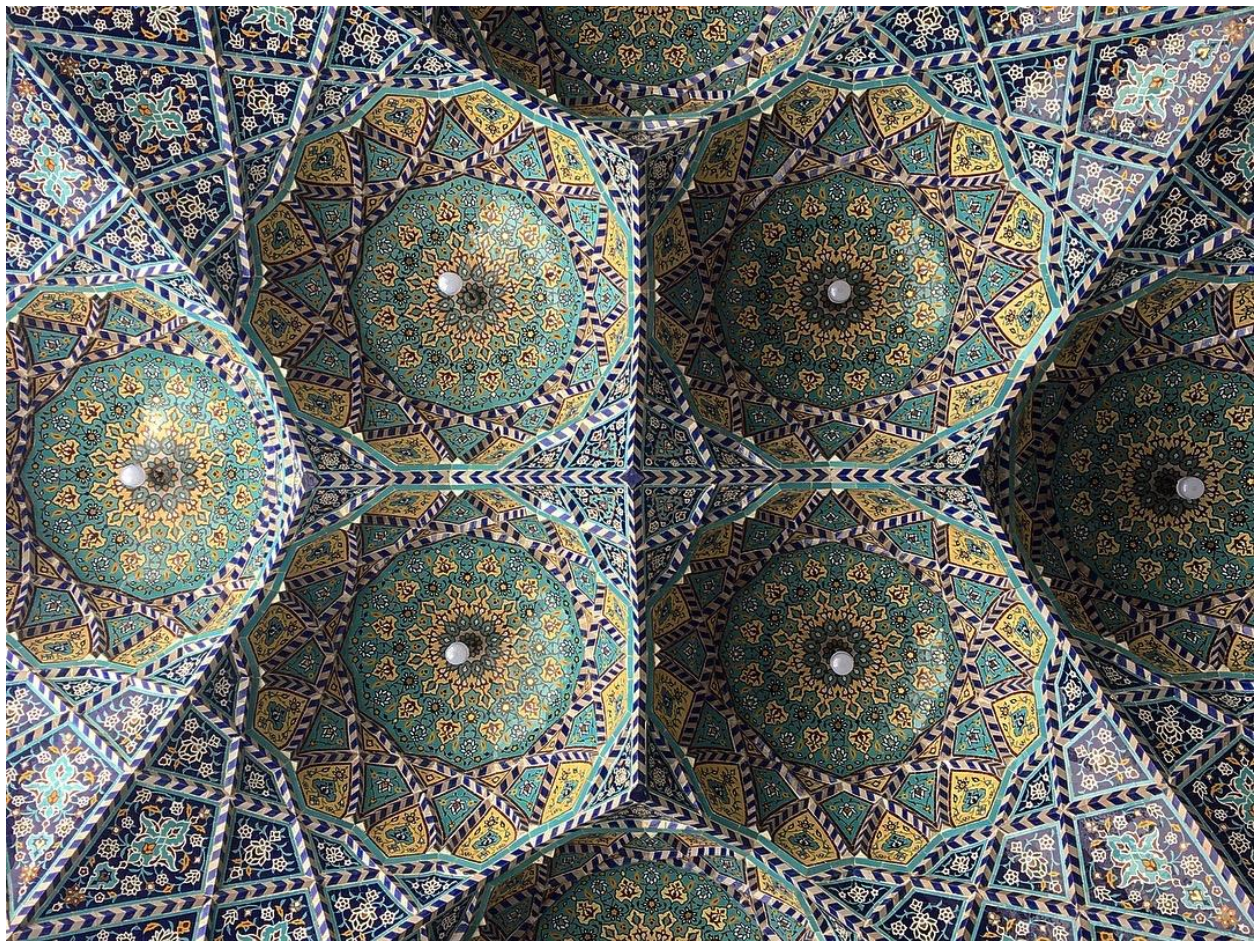


*Photographed by: Calvin Friesen*

*Qom*

Meeting with Ayatollah Alavi Boroujerdi (far right) at the Shrine of Lady Fatima Ma'sumeh





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Qom*

Ceiling at the Shrine of Fatima Ma'sumeh





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Qom*

A painting of Ayatollah al-Sistani (right) and a photograph of his Representative/son-in-law (left) above a showcase of gifts in al-Sistani's Museum.



*Photographed by: Calvin Friesen*

*Qom*

Morteza (left) next to the Representative of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani (right) in religious attire.





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Isfahan*

Outside view of the Masjed-e Jadid-e Abbasi or Shah Mosque in Imam Square.





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Isfahan*

Inside the Shah Mosque

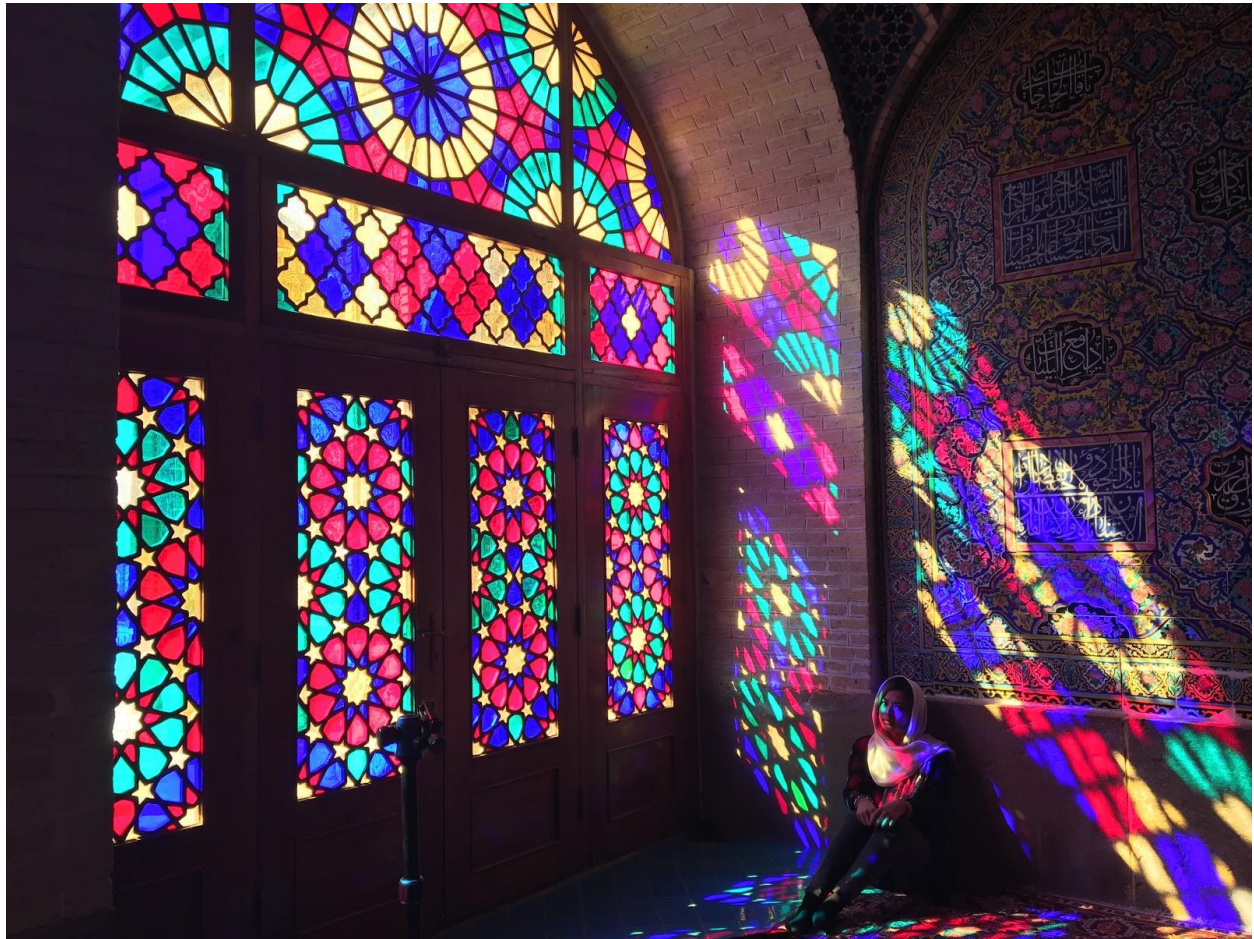


*Photographed by: John & Kathryn Fairfield*

*Mashhad*

Shrine of Imam Reza on the evening of Imam Hussein's birthday celebration





*Photographed by: Kristyn Rohrer*

*Shiraz*

Interior of the Nasir-ol-molk Mosque or the Pink Mosque



*Photographed by: Calvin Friesen*

*Shiraz*

Me kneeling next to Ali in the courtyard of the Pink Mosque